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Marketing Strategies to Enhance Profitability Among International Oil and Gas Service Companies

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Curtin University, 2006

BS, University of Tehran, 2002

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

A significant drop in oil price in 2014 resulted in enormous pressure on marketing managers of international oilfield service companies to address new market expectations. In such competitive conditions, some marketing managers lack strategies to leverage profitability during downturns. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies that senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies in the Middle East successfully used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. Theory of market segmentation, targeting, and positioning formed the conceptual framework for this study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews of 5 senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies throughout the Middle East. Data analysis was composed of organizing data, becoming familiar with the data, putting data in nodes, giving proper codes, interpreting the data, and presenting the results, which led to 5 primary themes including customers, relationship, differentiation, services, and prices. To increase reliability and reduce bias, triangulation was achieved by combining, comparing, and contrasting companies’ annual reports and website contents with participants’ information. Identifying the right strategies that lead to higher profitability is crucial for international oilfield companies. Developing dynamic segmentation strategies, targeting new market players, differentiating via innovation, and promoting reliable relationships increase the likelihood of grasping new opportunities. This study’s implications for positive social change include having more sustainable and profitable firms contributing to prosperity of local communities, which leads to healthier economies and more stable societies.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my delightful and devoted parents for all the supports, encouragements, and inspirations they have made throughout my life to ignite my passion for succeeding. To my lovely wife, for all her patience, love, and unwavering endorsements and praises she has made during my doctoral study. To my beautiful sister, for her compassion and emotions she has dedicated to me. And, to my wonderful grandmother, for who she was and what she taught me. Although she passed away without seeing my doctoral graduation day, I am sure she is smiling down from heaven and is very proud of me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

One of the most important objectives of any business unit is achieving profitability, which indicates effectiveness of marketing strategies in promoting products and services (Jemaiyo, 2013). Marketing strategies are essential to a successful business (Kotler & Keller, 2012), and embracing appropriate marketing strategies based on market changes is crucial for sustaining business activities (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014). The dramatic drop in oil price, starting in the second half of 2014, has affected many international and regional projects in the oil and gas industry (Duhon, 2015). Fewer projects mean fewer opportunities for business development and support within the oilfield industry.

Considering the challenging environment, marketing managers should develop a strong relationship with all stakeholders to tailor the right products and services based on the customers' needs. Decline in oil price affects oil production and drops revenue related to oil supply (Smagulova, Doskeyeva, & Radko, 2016). Exploring novel marketing strategies is necessary to stay competitive and profitable (Appiah-Adu & Amoako, 2016). During financial recessions, organization leaders tend to shed marketing functions; however, Civi (2013) asserted that firms' leaders should foster aggressive marketing during economic downturn. In this doctoral study, I aimed to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies implement to solve downturn market challenges.

Problem Statement

Since the second half of 2014, depressed oil price has caused a dramatic decline in a number of oil and gas projects and has changed the market demand for this commodity, resulting in reduced revenues (Duhon, 2015). Because of reduced oil prices, cash balances of 97 global oil and natural gas companies declined more than $8 billion for the fiscal year ending June 2015, reducing the profitability of these companies to almost zero (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015). The general business problem that I addressed in this study is that revenues of some multinational service companies in the oil and gas industry in the Middle East have declined. The specific business problem that I addressed in this study is that some senior marketing managers of international service companies in the oil and gas industry (ISCOGI) across the Middle East lack strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits in periods of declining oil prices.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that senior marketing managers of ISCOGI in the Middle East used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. The target population consisted of senior marketing managers who worked in different ISCOGI in the Middle East, each with several subsidiaries worldwide. I initiated my study with a sample of five participants from the list of companies attending the annual event of Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference (ADIPEC, 2016), which is one of the world's most influential oil and gas conferences. Participants included marketing managers who successfully used strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits in their respective companies during periods of declining oil prices. The overall accomplishment of companies in terms of competitive advantages is an indication of marketing managers' capability in using successful marketing strategies (Ahmed, Kristal, & Pagell, 2014). My finding's implications for positive social change include the potential for profit sustainability of the corporations and contribution to prosperity of employees' dependents and local communities. Greater profits mean more operations and further activities that necessitate employment, and, consequently, reduce unemployment rates.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative research for this study. Using a qualitative method provides flexibility in having an in-depth understanding of phenomena and exploring information on perspectives of individuals (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Erickson, 2012; Nassaji, 2015). Researchers use the qualitative method to comprehensively understand the topic and explore the subject based on the realities of the participants' experiences (Anyan, 2013; Hazzan & Nutov, 2014; Koning & Waistell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Researchers use a qualitative method to explore information and understand events (Bailey, 2014). In addition, researchers use the qualitative method to uncover trends in opinions and thoughts for a deeper understanding of problems (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013; Upjohn, Attwood, Lerotholi, Pfeiffer, & Verheyen, 2013). In this study, I sought to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance profitability and increase market share. A qualitative approach was appropriate for addressing my study’s purpose.

Researchers use a quantitative study to describe numerical changes via assessing the relationship and differences among variables (Harrison, 2013), testing the hypotheses, and generalizing the results (Shelton, Smith, & Mort, 2014; Wisdom, Cavaleri, Onwuegbuzie, & Green, 2012). Using a quantitative method, researchers may not be able to explore the participants’ experiences deeply through numerical models (Staggers & Blaz, 2013; Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). A mixed method is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research question(s) (Harrison, 2013). However, because the purpose of this doctoral study was not to examine the relationship or differences among variables, quantitative and mixed methods methodologies were not appropriate for exploring the marketing strategies that senior marketing managers of the international oil and gas service companies used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits.

Several qualitative designs exist, such as case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry (Erickson, 2012; Petty, Thomas, Stew, 2012; Rowley, 2012). However, considering the nature of the problem I examined, a case study was appropriate for this study. Researchers use case studies to build a foundation of previous theoretical or conceptual propositions and collect data per predefined protocols (Hyett, Kenny, & Deckson-Swift, 2014; Yin, 2014). Because the purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits, I chose a multiple case study as the design. According to Yin (2014), a multiple case study is a proper design in an exploratory stage of a study, which may lead to more robust and compelling results. Using a multiple case study might facilitate the understanding of the problem through incorporating various data collection methods among different cases.

In not choosing the other research designs, I considered the focus of each design. Grounded theory is an appropriate design when researchers seek to generate a new theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Thomas, 2012), which was not within the scope of my doctoral study. Ethnography design has similarities with grounded theory with a focus on the cultural aspects of the study (Flick, 2014; Zhu & Bargiela-Ciappini, 2013). I excluded ethnography because I did not intend to explore the cultural features of the marketing strategy. In phenomenological design, the focus is on the meaning of participants' lived experiences (Madjar, 2014). Therefore, phenomenological design was not suitable for this doctoral study. Researchers can use a narrative design to study an individual life story (Beattie, 2014; Safari & Thilenius, 2013; Wolgemuth, 2014). Hence, I did not select a narrative design. My approach was a qualitative multiple case study design to understand the marketing strategies that marketing managers in an international service company within the oil and gas industry used to enhance the sales performance of their corporations.

Research Question

The central question in my doctoral study was: What strategies do senior marketing managers of ISCOGI use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during declining oil price periods? Researchers will benefit from developing a clear and rich research question (Doody & Bailey, 2016). The objective of the study was to explore marketing strategies that marketing managers in the international oil and gas service companies used to improve the performance of their corresponding companies in terms of profits. Following is the list of the interview questions that I used.

Interview Questions

1. What marketing strategies do you use to improve sales performance and increase revenues and profits during the periods of declining oil prices?

2. What strategic marketing decisions do you consider to mitigate the effect of a decline in the oil price on sales performance, revenues, and profits?

3. What strategies do you use to deliver any possible changes in your marketing strategies during the periods of declining oil price to discernible customer groups?

4. What instruments, processes, and procedures do you use to measure the success of your marketing strategies during a decline in oil price?

5. What are the barriers to implementing your marketing strategies for enhancing sales performance, revenues, and profits during the periods of declining oil price?

6. What other additional information would you like to add to strategies you use for enhancing sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices?

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I used the segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) model as my conceptual framework. Wendell Smith (1956) developed the STP model, and, later, Kotler (1994) enhanced the model. The purpose of the STP model is to provide a tool to comprehend the attributes of different segments of a market and to develop and tune the marketing strategies accordingly (Smith, 1956). Smith identified the following key constructs for the STP model: (a) market segmentation, which represents clustering the existing and potential customers based on their common attributes; (b) market targeting, which discusses the process of focusing marketing strategies on a particular group; and (c) market positioning, which describes how to locate the products and services in customers' minds against competitors. The STP model is a segment of marketing strategy that marketers use to identify discernible customer groups, recognize the best segments to serve, and generate value for corresponding companies.

The STP model provides a means for positioning products and services to address different clusters of customers in an efficient manner (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Therefore, marketing managers can focus on the most profitable segments of their business markets and create the maximum benefit from existing and upcoming opportunities. The STP conceptual framework provides a foundation for understanding strategic decisions that marketing managers in the international oil and gas service companies use to increase sales performance. As applied to this study, I used STP conceptual framework for understanding and identifying the approaches that address the marketing strategies for enhancing sales performance and increasing revenues and profits in periods of declining oil prices.

Operational Definitions

Operational definitions section entails the terms, jargon, and commonly used words in the study. In my study, I used definitions from peer-reviewed papers and government sites and I have listed them in alphabetic order in this section. I have not included words and terms found in basic academic dictionaries.

Market positioning: Market positioning is a marketing strategy of locating the products and services in customers' minds against competitors (Smith, 1956).

Market segmentation: Market segmentation is the breakdown of the whole market into smaller clusters in which specific customers with common needs or passions are served with specific products or services (Aigbomian & Oboro, 2015).

Market targeting: Market targeting covers the process of directing and tailoring the marketing strategies towards a specific group of customers (Dibb & Simkin, 1991).

Marketing strategy: Marketing strategy includes a set of actions and decisions integrated together for the sake of identifying and meeting customers' requirements, and achieving the organization's marketing objectives (Mohammadzadeh, Aarabi, & Salamzadeh, 2013).

Oilfield service company: An oilfield service company is a company that provides tools, equipment, consultancy, risk management, and a wide range of services from oil and gas exploration to production, construction, and well abandonment (Sealy, Scott, & Walker, 2016).

Profitability: Profitability of a firm is the ability of the firms' management in earning profit, which in its simple definition is the firms' revenues minus the expenses related to generating the revenue (Novy-Marx, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are intakes researchers use to conduct the study and have a certain effect on the research findings (Jannson, 2013). As argued by Mesel (2013), having a predefined collection of assumptions that researchers can use as a ruler for a specific methodology, is not possible. All researchers have specific assumptions, though some assumptions may be common in some studies. In this study, my assumptions were threefold. My first assumption was regarding research participants' honesty and knowledge in responding to the questions, and avoiding any personal bias. Therefore, I assumed that participants would truthfully partake in the data collection process. Employment of open-ended questions accompanied by active listening skills facilitates the participants' replies and mitigates their concern about the integrity of the responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The second assumption corresponded to the methodology and design of the study; that is, I assumed that a qualitative case study was the best choice among the other available methods for conducting this doctoral study. Third, I assumed that my data were accurate.

Limitations

Any shortage in research prerequisites that might influence the quality of results or clarity of the research outcomes is a limitation (Gyatt et al., 2011). Several limitations existed in conducting this study. The first limitation came from a misinterpretation of findings, especially with regard to interviewing responses. Researchers design the validation process to ensure the repeatability of the study (Wahyuni, 2012) and to alleviate the researcher's bias. Chan, Fung, and Chien (2013) explained that recognizing the personal background and attitudes before commencing the study will limit the researchers' bias. Yin (2014) argued that researchers' previous experiences with the issue could cause some level of bias. The second limitation was related to the generalizability of the results. The third limitation was the potential loss or lack of participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries that researchers define to narrow the scope of the study (Denscombe, 2013; Simon & Goes, 2013; Yin, 2014). This study had some delimitations such as sample size, study location, and the oil and gas industry as the focus of the research. Such boundaries indicated the necessity to focus on the research topic and avoid a large sample with a vast amount of information. I interviewed five senior marketing managers across different geographical locations in the Middle East; however, the sample was not an exhaustive representation of all the senior marketing managers of the ISCOGI. Another parameter that narrowed the scope of my study was the knowledge of senior marketing managers participating in the study. That is, the level of knowledge and experiences of participants varied; however, all participants had a minimum of 10 years of experience with their corresponding companies. Furthermore, although cultural variances affect the decision-making process (Hackett & Wang, 2012), culture was not a criterion for selecting the participants for interviewing sessions in this study.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

A study of marketing managers' strategies on enhancing sales performance and revenue of the international oil and gas service companies was important for several reasons. First, oil and gas industry leaders could identify the most appropriate approaches to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during the periods of declining oil prices by having a comprehensive understanding of marketing strategies. Sabitova and Shavaleyeva (2015) argued that oil price directly affects the budget of the business units and affects surrounding businesses. Second, the study might indicate different marketing strategies that companies' leaders used in different geographical locations to increase revenues and profits. Third, the results of the study might show whether local community members could influence the development of appropriate marketing strategies during periods of declining oil prices.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include the potential to provide novel practical insights for senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies, which could assist them in enhancing the performance of their businesses and lead to positive impact on the economy of the host locations. The outcomes of this study might include strategic guidelines for senior marketing managers of the ISCOGI. Higher sales performance can result in a better cash flow and may lead to increased operations and activities, which requires hiring more employees and reducing unemployment.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the marketing strategies senior marketing managers of the international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the sales performance, revenues, and profits. To maintain business sustainability, enhance profitability, and preserve market share, corporate marketing managers must create and conduct strategies to meet and exceed the companies' objectives. Through literature reviews, researchers build an understanding of the conceptual framework, identify a foundation to the research topic, and support the ongoing research (Rowley, 2012). Given the complex nature of the interactions among international oil and gas service companies with their global customers, the existing literature related to strategies that marketing managers of international oil and gas companies use was limited and fragmented in scope. To review the literature pertinent to the research topic, I provided a critical evaluation of articles in contemporary peer-reviewed journals, published books, seminal references, and available information from government and international organizations' websites. I organized this review of literature in subsections related to the research question and conceptual framework of the study. The review of the literature starts with the conceptual framework of STP and is followed by analyzing and contrasting the other marketing theories. I then review marketing and marketing strategies, provide an overview of literature related to sales performance, review marketing strategies of oilfield service companies amid economic downturn. My aim was to build a coherent and comprehensive understanding of extant schools of mind.

I used the following databases to find the relevant literature: ScienceDirect, ProQuest Central, Emerald Insight, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and the database of the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE). The government websites and international organizations such as American Petroleum Institute (API), U.S. Department of Energy, and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) were other resources for gathering information related to the research topic. Some of the key phrases and words I used to extract the information include *marketing strategies*, *segmentation*, *targeting*, *positioning*, *sales performance*, *oil price, Internet marketing*, *relationship marketing*, *international oil and gas service companies*, and *multinational corporations* (*MNCs*). Since limited literature is available on the marketing strategies within the oil and gas industry, I expanded this literature review to include a wider range of international corporations. Systematic reviews of existing literature will shed light on true nature of the subject under investigation (Daigneault, 2013).

Analysis and synthesis of various sources consisted of summarizing the extant literature, comparing existing qualitative and quantitative studies related to the research topic, and contrasting existing literature. Kegler and Allegrante (2016) stressed the need to establish comparability between and across research studies to facilitate evidentiary process and strategies. This literature review contained 447 references including 414 peer-reviewed journals (93%), 18 seminal books, seven websites, and two doctoral theses. In my doctoral study, 90% of the referenced sources were published within 5 years from the estimated date of approval from chief academic officer (CAO), dated from 2013 to 2017. To ensure a logical flow of information, the literature review consisted of several subsections including the conceptual framework of STP followed by a review of other marketing theories; marketing and marketing strategies; sales performance; and marketing strategies of oilfield service companies amid downturn, each of them building upon peer-reviewed articles and semantic works of pioneers in corresponding fields.

Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning

Different models and processes exist through which marketers can demonstrate their approach towards linking their companies' marketing strategies to the overall markets. One of the widespread models is STP model by Smith (1956). The purpose of STP model is to provide a tool to comprehend the attributes of different segments of a market and develop and tune the marketing strategies accordingly (Smith, 1956). Smith identified the following key constructs for the STP model: (a) market segmentation, which represents clustering the existing and potential customers based on their common attributes; (b) market targeting, which is the process of focusing marketing strategies on a particular group; and (c) market positioning, which indicates strategies on how to locate the products and services in customers' minds against competitors. The STP model is a segment of marketing strategy marketers use to identify discernible customer groups, recognize the best segments to serve, and generate value for their companies.

The STP model provides the chance to position the products and services to address different clusters of customers in an efficient manner (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Bierbooms, Van Oers, and Bongers (2014) advised business managers to move toward a successful business by targeting the right market, positioning the products, and developing marketing communication strategies. Marketing managers can focus on the most profitable segments of their business markets and create the maximum benefit from existing and upcoming opportunities. Considering the variety in consumers' needs and wants, companies' marketers have reached the idea to move from mass marketing towards a more specific target within the market (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Therefore, marketers divide the customers into different segments based on similarities in customers' requirements and likenesses of their buying characteristics (Venter, Write, & Dibb, 2015). A proper market segmentation will positively affect both market performance and salespeople's performance (Terho, Eggert, Hass, & Ulaga, 2015). Aigbomian and Oboro (2015) argued that the success of market segmentation relies on the degree to which a customer is satisfied by products and services from the corresponding firms.

In recent decades, significant changes have occurred in the nature of the marketplaces, moving from national markets to multicultural ones. With the ever-growing role of multicultural marketplaces in the global economy, the focus of the international marketing has shifted from cross-national scale to a global scale (Demangeot, Broderick, & Craig, 2015). Identity, national integration policies, intergroup relations, networks, and competencies are the main conceptual focuses in multicultural markets (Demangeot et al., 2015). Although there has always been a focus on products and places, recently a change has occurred toward people who use such products. Therefore, more variables exist for segmenting a market in comparison with the emergence era of market segmentation. Because multicultural marketplaces are complex, diverse, and dynamic, new sets of challenges and opportunities exist for marketers to ascertain and understand them, and, consequently, strive to identify innovative marketing strategies that can address those challenges. Such approach contrasts with the old-school idea of sending a message to a mass audience and hoping to catch the interested consumers.

In a qualitative study, Venter et al. (2015) aimed to understand the natural setting of market segmentation using multiple data sources within a multinational company (MNC) in information and communication technology (ICT). The results of the study indicated four stages for market segmentation in the firm under study. The first stage included all the introductory activities that involved all parties to sit together and build a foundation for upcoming phases. In Phase 2, the team started the process of segmentation. In Phase 3, the results of the market segmentation from the previous stage would be reviewed by a champion and be prepared for business strategies. The focus of the final phase was on implementation of the plan. Establishing legitimacy, theory embodiment, contextualization, and process maintenance are the four sets of actions that managers should consider in adopting a marketing process (Venter et al., 2015). When only one or two segments exist in the marketplace, a small firm has the opportunity to compete against the larger corporations effectively; however, the same firm does not have the same opportunity in markets with several segments (Aigbomian & Oboro, 2015; Han, Ye, Fu, & Chen, 2014). Therefore, market size and number of segments can affect the marketing strategies of the companies.

Depending on a variety of reasons, some of the marketers choose their target segments as nationwide, whereas others consider smaller and more focused segments. In a quantitative research study, Budeva and Mullen (2013) studied 30 countries from 1990 to 1999 to investigate the effect of economics and national culture on segmentation patterns. Using country-specific aggregation data to put the world market into reasonable clusters seemed to be a reasonable approach for some organizations. Economic and cultural variables can influence the countries to shift from one market segment to another over a decade (Budeva & Mullen, 2013). Therefore, Budeva and Mullen suggested that marketers review the economic and cultural variables together on a regular basis to have a comprehensive conclusion on their marketing strategies through international market segmentations.

Market segmentation may also affect the industrial rearrangements. When segmentation is in the market, the likelihood of observing industrial mergers increases (Chaudhuri, 2014). By reviewing more than 2 decades of data from the United States and Europe, Chaudhuri argued that markets with a greater level of segmentation and more cost convexity are more susceptible to face multiple acquisitions across borders, either simultaneously or in short consecutive intervals. As soon as a multinational enterprise (MNE) merges with a local firm in a particular market, the price of the MNE's products in that local market will increase, whereas the price in other marketplaces will decrease (Chaudhuri, 2014). According to Chaudhuri, even countries with similar market conditions and the same level of access to information may face industrial mergers due to strategic decisions intrigued by trade liberalization. Therefore, market segmentation directly affects the sales performance and profitability of the firms through affecting the end price of the products and services.

In addition to market segmentation, researchers studied the role of cooperation with third parties in profit augmentation. Du, Yang, Liang, and Yang (2016) proposed a model that could explain the effects of market segmentation strategies combined with third parties' involvement. In their case, hotel and travel agencies, Du et al. emphasized the growing number of consumers who use e-commerce tools to acquire needed services, either directly via a service provider or through third-party agencies. The results of the study showed a mutual benefit for both service providers and third parties in terms of securing more customers and consequently more revenue for the service provider and business sustainability for third parties through special offers to customers (Du et al., 2016). Therefore, in market segmentation, marketers should look for out of the box options rather than merely dividing the market into a particular number of segments. The service provider should also consider the sensitivity and demand of individual consumers in customizing their market segmentation strategies (Du et al., 2016). Therefore, demand structure may change the market segmentation on a case-by-case basis, which requires a comprehensive research on the marketplace, competitors, and resources before conducting any market segmentation strategy.

Market segmentation may affect the total cost and lead to higher profitability. In a quantitative study, Gangurde and Akarte (2015) found that having a higher number of segments will reduce the total cost of the segments. With only two segments, the cost of total segment product is decreased by 40%, whereas having three or four segments reduces costs by 60% (Gangurde & Akarte, 2015). Therefore, firms with the ability to create more value through further segmentation can benefit from lower total segment cost. In another study, Güçdemir and Selim (2015) reviewed 317 business customers in original equipment manufacturer sector and introduced loyalty, average annual demand, long-term relationship potential, the average percentage of annual demand, and average percentage change in annual sales revenue as five new criteria for market segmentation in B2B relationships. Such criteria provided the opportunity for marketers to develop more effective customer relationship management (CRM) strategies. Because variables involved in market segmentation may change with time, marketers should review the customers' segmentation regularly and collect reliable data for CRM databases to extract the most appropriate segmentation strategies (Güçdemir & Selim, 2015). Therefore, marketers should consider all possible variables in designing the most appropriate market segmentation strategies.

One of the strategies marketing managers use to distinguish their products and services is differentiation. Product differentiation can influence the brand equity and pricing strategies. Davcik and Sharma (2015) reviewed 735 fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) to build a model for examining the effect of product differentiation on pricing of the final products. The model covered different measures such as consumer approach, financial approach, and marketing approach through two-stage tactic in which regression analysis indicated the relationship between variables and price performance while cluster analysis determined the relationship between premium price and product differentiation driven by innovation (Davcik & Sharma, 2015). The results of the study emphasized on important role of product differentiation on its performance output. Likewise, innovations based on advanced technologies have the same level of importance on product performance. Marketers can intend for higher-price products if they can successfully distinguish their brands from competition (Davcik & Sharma, 2015). Moreover, since innovation marketing is still in its early stages of development, marketing managers can differentiate their products and services from competitors by investing in marketing innovation (Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016). Furthermore, the outcomes of the study indicated a positive and significant relationship between marketing investment, as a financial phenomenon, and the pricing strategy.

Using novel marketing techniques is an essential strategy in successfully entering the international marketplaces. Haverila (2013) studied 230 eligible companies across Finland firms that had both domestic and international revenues. Haverila argued marketing methods had an important role in new product development (NPD) in which differentiation and pricing were the two significant variables from a managerial standpoint. When introducing new high-tech products to the market, managers should position the final product in the marketplace with different features from competitors' offering, while the new product price is in accordance to the performance differences (Haverila, 2013). In this regard, utilization of personal sales' information rather than traditional marketing information systems may assist organizations managers in better preparation of marketing strategies including segmentation and pricing techniques.

Different marketers use a variety of techniques and approaches such as K-means, artificial neural networks, and Taguchi method in segmenting their target markets. Some of the methodologies have few drawbacks that prevent widespread use of the technique across international marketplaces, for example, K-means suffers from dependency to the location of the initial cluster centers (Hong, 2012). Taguchi method allows the marketers to optimize the segmentation design even if an interaction exists among the control variables. Hong investigated horizon length, research data period, and many observations as three interacting elements of control variables and indicated that Taguchi method enables marketers to test different operational variables at the same time. Taguchi method provides marketers the chance of revising their marketing strategies based on customers' needs (Hong, 2012). Variety seeking is another criterion that marketers can use to segment international customers. Legoherel, Hsu, and Dauce (2015) discussed that variety seeking effects the consumers' choice. An alternative for segmenting the behavioral data is Chi-square automatic interaction detection (CHAID), especially when researchers are dealing with behavioral data (Legoherel et al., 2015). Therefore, although there are difficulties in designing the most proper market segmentation, marketers can practice different techniques and select the one that most suits their target market and can address the market needs.

Different marketing managers use different processes in segmenting the market. Simkin (2008) studied market segmentation based on consumers' purchasing behavior, customers' profile, consumers' decision-making, and consumers' needs through interviewing senior and line managers of over 20 corporates. Simkin introduced a six-stage process for implementing marketing strategies including (a) creating a team consist of cross-functional managers from sales and marketing to operation and distribution, (b) grouping the extant customers, (c) recognizing the customers' characteristics and purchasing behavior, (d) identifying dissimilarities between customers traits and profiles, (e) regrouping the customers with similarities in performas, and (f) applying marketing mix for each target group. Although Simkin's attempts provided a systematic guideline for implementation of market segmentation, it did not cover the situations in which firms' managers seek for fresh markets.

Market segmentation is a dynamic process that requires continuous effort in reconciling the strategies according to the market changes. Lemmens, Croux, and Stremersch (2012) studied 398 product-country combination from 79 countries between 1977 and 2009 to identify a dynamic modeling framework for dealing with dynamic marketplaces. Country segmentation for new product growth is a dynamic process and as the life cycle of the products changes, a considerable variation exists in the segmentation of the countries (Lemmens et al., 2012). Therefore, leaders of the companies operating across international markets should revise their previous static segmentation models to address the changes accordingly. Tuma and Decker (2013) proposed the use of finite mixture models (FMMs) in developing the proper market segmentation process. Successful market segmentation requires paying attention to crucial factors such as initializing and convergence of the algorithms, model selection criteria, and estimation methods (Tuma & Decker, 2013). Marketing managers must integrate the best recommendations for selecting the most appropriate model for market segmentation.

Dynamics of the market and consumer tendencies are influential parameters in selecting the right marketing strategy. In a quantitative study across the United States, Love and Okada (2015) found customers with a tendency to buy high-quality products showed a higher level of construal associated with abstract mental models and were more willing to pay higher prices. In contrary, customers with tendency towards low-price products depicted the lower level of construal associated with concrete mental models (Love & Okada, 2015). Likewise, Lemmerer and Menrad (2015) found difficulties of the product prices have less effect on quality-seeking consumers. As a result, different market segments showed different willingness to pay higher or lower prices, which can significantly affect the marketing strategies in addressing those dispositions. Love and Okada (2015) argued marketing strategies based on increasing saliency, led to efficient outcomes in a higher level of construal comparing to strategies that target a lower level of construal. Therefore, marketers should focus on the primary features of the products in segmenting the marketplaces in which the tendency is of higher quality, and in contrary, marketers should focus on secondary features of the products whenever targeting a low-price market (Love & Okada, 2015). Other behavioral and mental models may affect the consumers' choice, and consequently, influence the segmentation criterion.

Stakeholders in the marketplace may influence each other and alter the market tendency. Linking stakeholder groups using the stakeholder cross-impact analysis (SCIA), and assigning a numbers that indicate the strength of stakeholder's influence, provides a scatter diagram for clustering the stakeholders in the market (Mariconda & Lurati, 2015). The result of such scatter diagram indicated four different categories including (a) driving stakeholders, which have a great influence on others; (b) linking stakeholders, which have influence on others while getting influenced by others; (c) dependent stakeholders, which are only influenced by others and have no or little effect on others; and (d) autonomous stakeholders, which neither influence others nor get influenced by them (Mariconda & Lurati, 2015). SCIA indicated how strong the relationship between different stakeholders is and how they direct each other in a marketplace. Therefore, marketers can use SCIA in identifying and targeting the most influential stakeholders and align the marketing strategies accordingly. However, in case of having a high number of stakeholders, the model will become complicated; hence, the experience of marketers will play a significant role in defining the quality of outcomes.

Some researchers studied the use of fuzzy logic in segmenting the customers (Casabayó, Agell, & Sánchez-Hernández, 2015; Rezaei & Ortt, 2013; Zandi, Tavana, & O'Connor, 2012). The fuzzy segmentation, which did not push individuals to belong to a single category, would assist marketers to remove ambiguous market information and find the reality of the market (Casabayó et al., 2015). Therefore, firms' managers will benefit from integrating clustering techniques with adaptable artificial intelligent tools to remove ambiguous market information and increase the data realism. Fuzzy logic works based on two distinguishable abilities of humans including making rational decisions when a lack of perfect information exists and ability to make decisions while there is no computations or measurements (Rezaei & Ortt, 2013). According to Rezaei and Ortt, fuzzy rule-base systems give the organizations' managers the opportunity to formulate marketing strategies for a group of suppliers within a particular segment. As a result, managers can use their creativity and generate novel approaches for supplier segmentation.

The process of market segmentation goes beyond a single stage process. Zandi et al. (2012) introduced four key stages in market segmentation using fuzzy multi-criteria methodology including: (a) structuring the existing problem, (b) forming the market segments, (c) evaluating the selected segments, and (d) identifying the proper description for each segments' strategy. Researchers can integrate fuzzy logic theory with real option analysis (ROA) matrix to evaluate and select the optimum number of segments in a systematic process (Zandi et al., 2012). Success of any decision-making process using the fuzzy models relies on the managerial judgment and experiences of the marketers. Having the right people in the marketing team is an essential prerequisite for any firm to increase the chance of identifying the most appropriate segments in the marketplace.

In market segmentation process, marketers should consider all level of market breakdown to reach the most suitable segments. Segmenting the countries based on high-income countries (HIC), emerging market (EM), or even continent is not an effective way for multinational corporates (MNCs) and may just cover a superficial aspect of the market (Schlager & Maas, 2013). After studying more than 6,513 participants from Europe, United States, India, Brazil, Mexico, and South East Asia, Schlager and Maas (2013) argued marketers in the MNCs should have a deep knowledge about the marketplaces to detect all the hidden aspects of the market heterogeneity and fit their segmentation to the needs of the market.

In segmenting a market, one may focus on how customers in emerging markets differentiate between international and local products. Although there are some differences, the way consumers in emerging markets look at local versus international products is not as dramatically different as some researchers attempt to draw (Tanusondjaja, Greenacre, Banelis, Truong, & Andrews, 2015). Therefore, similar to developed marketplaces, regarding market segmentation, marketing managers of MNCs should consider all the market segmentation theories and processes in classifying and clustering the emerging markets. In both emerging and developed markets, the tendency of customers is towards good value for money, high quality, and satisfying the needs (Tanusondjaja et al., 2015). Thus, segmentation remains one of the best practices in introducing products into the market, either an emerging or a developed market. In a quantitative study, Chen, Chen, and Zhou (2014) studied 400 Chinese firms that had a joint venture business model with international companies. Chen et al. found introducing superior technologies from parent companies to their joint ventures alongside with adding new features to products based on local requirements would increase the chance of being distinguished from local competitors. Additional features based on local customers preferences not only grow the profitability of both the joint venture and the parent company through higher sales but also increase the market share within local and global marketplaces.

Regardless of the market segmentation technique a marketer may use, the aim is two-fold; first to support the market needs and customers’ wants, second to maximize the corporate performance and profitability. In addition, there might be inter-market segmentation, which requires excessive consideration and in-depth investigation inside the target market (Awan, 2014). Managers in a company can tend towards market orientation strategies, or brand orientation approaches to fulfill their objectives. Market orientation includes strategies that focus on customers' needs and wants, while brand orientation entails all the attempts in identifying firms' brand through interaction with customers (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). Wang (2015) suggested managers in high-tech companies should try to enhance their market orientation to increase the quality of their tech-based products, and consequently, get an edge over the competition in innovation performance.

A shift in the entire perception of staff, structure, and the operations of a firm might lead to a change in the organization's orientation, which required a change in some of the policies of the corporates (Urde et al., 2013). Wang (2015) discussed managers should include service innovation in their market orientation process to have a complete picture of the determinants of innovation performance. According to Wang, service innovation, alongside the market orientation approach, may lead to an increase in innovation performance. Innovation will empower organizations leaders in collecting required inputs from customers and competition into marketing strategies and avoid being surprised by market reactions (Božic & Ozretic-Došen, 2015). As a result, there should be a transformation process within the whole organization to adopt the novel mindset. In other words, firms' managers should be able to balance their product orientation without compromising other strategies. Therefore, there should be a continuous negotiation among different market orientation strategies, with a focus on the short-term sales versus long-run brand establishments, to avoid any possible discrepancy.

Product consumers and service users may influence the market orientation. In a sense, customers' buying preferences may have a direct influence on the market segmentation criterion (Brito, Soares, Almeida, Monte & Byvoet, 2015; Robson, Pitt, & Wallstrom, 2013). Although lifestyle and preferences of the customers may be a propelling force for classifying the products or services (Ogbeide & Bruwer, 2013), there are other criteria that may affect the market segmentation. Marketing experts should consider different variables such as demographic, geographic, biometric, product characteristics, customers behavioral, and psychographic of customers when designing their market segmentation (Brito et al., 2015; Hand & Singh, 2014). Having a homogeneous target group will simplify the classification and increase the chance of attracting more potential customers through offering more relevant products or services.

Changes in customers' budgets, short-term and long-term objectives, and demand from inter-connected industries may alter the buying preferences of customers, and consequently, may lead to a different approach towards segmenting the market based on a new criterion. Segmenting a market based on specific criteria means deselecting other non-qualifier customers. Deselecting the non-qualified audiences may result in communication efficiency and increase the focus of targeting (Djokic, Salai, Kovac-Znidersic, & Tomic, 2013). The outcome will be a more homogenized target population that will receive a higher value proposition through crafted products. Aiming specific target groups may also improve the ability of the firms' marketing managers to send the right message to the right audiences (Djokic et al., 2013). Hence, marketers will progress the value proposition and make it more compelling for each group of customers based on their interests.

One of the parameters that can affect both market segmentation and product positioning is how enthusiastic the customers are to pay a higher price for the sake of higher quality. Love and Okada (2015) found that there was a notable difference between market segments in terms of customers' willingness to pay for a product. While some individuals are willing to pay more for a high-quality product, others may weigh more on low price. According to Love and Okada, marketers should focus on the primary features of the products in the marketing segments that tendency is on the higher quality; on the contrary, the focus in low-price markets should be in the secondary features of the products. Therefore, in segmenting a market, considering consumer tendency towards quality, price, or both is essential.

Marketers should decide whether they want to position their product or service based on market orientation or brand orientation. Gruber-Muecke and Hofer (2015) investigated 170 CEOs, marketing managers, and marketing directors and found that market-oriented strategies had a positive effect on the performance of the firms. Wang (2015) conducted research across 1000 manufacturing companies and found market orientation has a strong and direct influence on the innovation performance of the firms. Urde and Koch (2014) conducted research on extant literature associated with product and service positioning and found the root for market positioning comes from sharing a huge amount of information with customers, which in turn, requires a comprehensive understanding of customers' needs and implementing the most appropriate means of communications. Choosing between being market oriented or brand oriented depends upon the intention of the organization's leaders and the way they are going to implement such positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014). Consequently, the objective of the organization has a great affect on the positioning strategies. Therefore, creating a logical balance between positioning a product based on market orientation or using brand orientation for market positioning is important. For example, if the organization's goal is to respond to customers' unmet needs, being market oriented will serve better while in the case of focus on the records of accomplishment of the firm and strengthening the market position, then a brand-oriented approach will suit more. Marketing managers and their subsidiaries should have the flexibility to adopt different strategies based on internal and external changes.

In the service providing industry such as oil and gas service companies, there may be several solutions available for a customer's issue, which requires service providers to propose the best solution. Keränen and Falkala (2014) emphasized the importance of creating brands that can bring solutions to customers by understanding the primary goal of the customers and adjusting their capabilities to answer customers' top priorities. Positioning a solution brand requires more in-depth analysis of the customers' objectives and being closely involved with customers (Keränen & Falkala, 2014). For this reason, firms’ managers should consider customers’ specific parameters, competitors, and the distinctive traits of the offered solutions in positioning their brands. Moreover, managers should know and utilize different brand positioning strategies in dealing with different type of customers.

Sometimes, companies’ managers must position their brands against industry leaders or large competitors. Owners of the smaller brands can benefit from recognizing and competing large brands within their context (Paharia, Avery, & Keinan, 2014). One of the effective marketing strategies could be focusing on competitive narrative, especially emphasizing on the attributes of the competition process rather than attributes of the product (Paharia et al., 2014). Brand positioning is particularly important for emergent products and services due to the unfamiliarity of the market with the quality and efficiency of the new entrants. Therefore, the owner of small or emergent brands should learn how to get involved in the competition process and how to approach existing and potential customers. On the contrary, Paharia et al. argued large brands’ owners should avoid triggering the market’s competitive narratives because it may negatively affect the consumers’ perception of the existing large brand.

In some cases, two or more companies collaborate and offer to the market a single product as a cobrand. In such cases, positioning perceptions in cobranding will affect the perception of customers in facing the cobrand. Organizations’ leaders should review and understand the brand positioning of their partner brands prior to taking any positioning strategy for their cobrand product (Singh, Kalafatis, & Ledden, 2014). Managers can select the dominant brand positioning for the cobrand or emphasize on similarities or dissimilarities of each brand positioning perceptions. Considering the importance of selecting the right partner for creating a cobrand, Singh et al. suggested to use a positioning matrix that contains different strategies based on different partners' positioning before selecting the partner brands. Sometimes, building novel strategies for the cobrands that inherit all the strong features of each partners' distinct brands is inevitable.

Knowing customers' characteristics alongside the specifications of each brand is essential for marketers. Therefore, positioning a brand requires special attention in introducing the right personality to individual brands. Su and Tong (2015) argued seven dimensions describe a personality of a brand including *competence, attractiveness, excitement, innovation, activity, ruggedness,* and *sincerity*. Understanding the brand's personality will give competitive advantage to managers and provide marketers the chance to understand the consumer's perceptions from communications, product usage, and competitiveness of the marketplace (Su & Tong, 2015). Consequently, marketing managers should know what customers think about certain products and how customers differentiate competitive brands from each other. Base on such information, marketers can customize their brand personality to address a particular target market.

Rival Theories of the Conceptual Framework

Researchers use a variety of theories in explaining the marketing strategies of businesses. For example, Khan (2014) studied some aspects of marketing and found relationship marketing as an emerged marketing theory that scholars and researchers started to use in the early 1990s. Using the theory of relationship marketing enables researchers to understand how building a close bond with current and potential customers will promote the ongoing business activities (Khan, 2014). The fundamental rule of relationship marketing is trust, commitment, and gratitude (Mishra, 2016). Moreover, relationship marketing has a considerable effect on profitability (Borisavljevic, 2013). Relationship marketing is an approach to edge over competitors by strengthening the communication networks during the implementation of marketing strategies of the firms (Gharehbashloni & Seify, 2014). Ritter and Andersen (2014) argued marketers could enhance the organization's performance by recognizing the cross sales potential of customers through relationship marketing. Therefore, marketers can invest on relationship marketing hoping for better attracting the customers towards existing and novel products.

Khan (2014) named some of the concepts of relationship marketing such as database marketing, loyalty marketing, micromarketing, interactive marketing, and customers collaborating. A derivative part of relationship marketing is the concept of the customers relationship marketing (CRM). In fact, CRM is an emergent paradigm in which marketers use customers information to develop and manage a strong relationship with customers and extend the value creation (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). Marketing managers use all the resources available to collect and nourish the CRM databases regularly (Stein, Smith, & Lancioni, 2013). Choudhury & Harrigan

(2014) argued CRM has a positive role in creating customers value chain when used alongside the customers knowledge management technologies. Meanwhile, Williams, Ashill, and Naumann (2016) claimed CRM is an effective tool only when marketers utilize it *correctly* and do not try to universalize the applications of the CRM.

Applications of CRM is not limited to the relationships between firms and their customers. CRM is a practical tool for promoting the communication between companies and suppliers (Brindley & Oxborrow, 2014). Using CRM in conjunction with supply chain, organizations' managers can expect an improvement in the customers satisfaction and loyalty (Hardwick, Anderson, & Cruickshank, 2013). Antony (2013) emphasized marketing managers can enhance their marketing initiatives through an understanding of different aspects of the interactions between customers and service providers. Homburg, Wilczek, and Hahn (2014) found a considerable improvement in business achievements due to a better relationship between organizations and their end users, customers, and other business partners. Building a strong, trustworthy, and manageable relationship with customers is an inevitable part of having a successful business, and may lead to attracting more customers.

Another theory researchers utilize in studying the marketing strategies of organizations is the resource-advantage theory. Magnusson, Westjohn, Semenov, Randrianasolo, and Zdravkovic (2013) asserted resource-advantage theory supports marketing strategies and competition focused approaches to leverage the practice of business. In resource-advantage theory, the focus is on the organizations' resources and the influence of the resources on the financial performance of the organization (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). Although resources of an organization have a direct effect on the organization's success, the effect of the resources may vary based on the size of the business, nature of the business, and the level of competitiveness. In small businesses, distribution of scarce resources is of high importance (Baker, 2013). Therefore, aligning the marketing strategies with organization's resources may add value to the competitive gains of the organization.

Marketing and Marketing Strategy

Appropriate marketing strategies are essential parts in defining the success of any business. Selecting the most effective marketing strategy entails acquiring a comprehensive knowledge of all choices and their applications under different working conditions and organizational environments (Kotler & Keller, 2012). For several decades prior to 1950s, the scholars and practitioners equated marketing strategy with marketing management (Rosenberg, 1978). Perhaps, one of the incipient usages of the term marketing strategy goes back to Lyon (1926), where he or she described the marketing strategy as a synonym for sales management. Lyon argued marketers should plan and replan marketing strategies to cope with dynamic changes of the workplace and achieve the ultimate business goals. Neelakanta and Noori (2015) contended marketers should understand the industry, related technologies, and probable changes within the relevant industries to be able to measure effective marketing strategies.

With the development of marketing management in the 1950s and after, the marketing strategy was explored and developed by pioneers such as Bartels (1988), Drucker (1954), and Smith (1956). Since then, researchers and scholars have emphasized the importance of developing appropriate marketing strategies that can address the needs of the customers, as well as the marketplaces. Although companies' managers should have a sustainable marketing strategy, they should also cultivate novel strategies alongside the development of market requirements and technology advancements. Kotler and Keller (2012) stressed the significance of having a blend of flexibility and discipline for a successful development of the most appropriate marketing strategy. Marketers should consider the practicality and legitimacy of the marketing strategies to ensure their success (Yang & Su, 2014). Subsequently, sticking to a solid idea without considering the internal and external conditions may result in a failure of the plan.

Before marketing became an integral part of the organizations, marketing managers had experienced different phases of development in marketing practices. Kumar (2015) identified four areas of development based on customers' issues of profitability and the firms' utilization of resources in addressing such issues. These focus areas consisted of (a) how customers' issues can potentially bring value to the firms, (b) how to maximize such value, (c) how to assign the resources effectively to address customers' issues, and (d) how to allocate proper strategies that can increase the customers' profitability (Kumar, 2015). Kumar acknowledged marketing had become an integral part of the organizations due to engaging the stakeholders in the course of value generation through marketing practices. Implementing the customers' feedback into marketing strategies will also enhance the profitability (Karamehmedovic & Bredmar, 2013). Wilkinson and Young (2013) contended that marketers should move the marketing research towards a dynamic and processed-based methodology to combine different worldviews, such as reductionism and constructionism. Leading company managers, regardless of their industry nature, deploy marketing strategies in an efficient manner that ensures performance enhancement of the firms (Appiah-Adu & Amoako, 2016). The adaptation of novel patterns in using the media and focusing on the marketing effectiveness and efficiency has put the marketing discipline to a core position in the organizations.

Embracing the most appropriate marketing strategies according to the changes in the marketplaces is a key parameter for sales and marketing teams (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014). Measuring the effect of marketing strategies is essential to improve marketing performance. Mintz and Currim (2013) argued a positive relationship exists between utilization of proper metrics and the performance of the marketing mix. However, the process of measuring the marketing strategies is sophisticated and requires a blend of collaboration among multiple disciplines (Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström, & Freundt, 2014). Marketers can enhance the organization's performance by recognizing the cross sales potential of the customers (Ritter & Andersen, 2014). Integration of different metrics enables organizations' managers to have a better measurement of their marketing strategies. Having competent marketing experts in an organization may increase the total influence of marketing strategy measurements on the performance of the firm (Martensen & Mouritsen, 2014). Therefore, having the right measurement of marketing results and its influence on the firms' performance is of the same importance as having the right marketing strategies, which entails having a robust marketing department.

In a quantitative study, Feng, Morgan, and Rego (2015) examined the consequence of empowered marketing department within 1000 public U.S. companies on the performance of the firms. The results of the study indicated an increase in the power of marketing departments across U.S. firms during 1993 and 2008 had a significant influence on the companies' activities and their future financial performance (Feng et al., 2015). Powerful marketing functions mean potential for marketers to implement their marketing strategies in accordance with the market needs and company's mission. In a study within hospitality service providers across the Middle East, the researchers identified different marketing strategies may influence the development plan and the distribution of resources (Ahmad & Saber, 2015). In a sense, marketing strategies are in close connection with other functions of the organization and show the necessity for a well-harmonized relationship among all disciplines.

Developing marketing strategies requires establishment of appropriate marketing research. In a quantitative study of over 967 Nigerian companies, Ewah (2013) found organizations' leaders should focus on marketing research with the emphasis on customers' needs. Understanding the audience's needs and their buying attitude will show marketers how to create value-added content (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Well-planned marketing research will identify valuable information regarding potential marketplaces for firms' products. An efficient marketing department would result in better planning, more effective decisions, increasing market share, more profitability, and more satisfied customers (Ewah, 2013). Marketing research per se is a proactive strategy that can potentially influence the firms' performance. In more competitive marketplaces, the role of marketing managers and their strategies is more evident. Marketing managers' capabilities can increase the performance of the firms (Ramaseshan, Ishak, & Rabbanee, 2013) and raise the shareholder's value at the same time (Hansen, McDonal, & Mitchell, 2013). Researchers argued when more focus is on marketing versus operations, higher organizations' competitiveness will result in higher shareholders' value (Hansen et al., 2013). The result of such studies expressed the important role of marketing strategies of marketing departments on the companies' competitive advantages.

In response to the high demand of practitioners for understanding the linkage between marketing and other departments, Huang and Wang (2013) studied the conflicts between marketing department and organizations' department of Information Technology (IT), as two different functions with a different worldview. While marketing managers are more selective in adopting the technology than their counterparts in the IT department, both marketing and IT managers recognize the advantages of market orientation more than learning orientation (Huang & Wang, 2013). A simple alignment between marketing and IT departments is not enough for improving the performance (Huang & Wang, 2013). Therefore, to enhance the performance, marketing managers should be more learning oriented, and IT managers need to see a culture consistent with the technology.

Although organizations' leaders attempt to move marketing from a distinct function to an everybody's responsibility model, marketing managers should entail especial capabilities for developing and conducting marketing strategies. Feiler and Teece (2014) reviewed an exploration case in the oil and gas upstream and suggested dynamic capability as a pillar for sustaining the execution of strategies. Managers can empower the organizations' internal and external competencies by merging dynamic capabilities with strategies to address fast changing markets (Shuen, Feiler, & Teece, 2014). Loveland, Thompson, Lounsbury, and Dantas (2015) considered assertiveness, visionary leadership, optimism for career satisfaction, and customers orientation as some of the competencies that marketing managers should have to take the best marketing strategies. Loveland et al. (2015) studied more than 465 marketing managers including 141 female marketing managers across U.S. firms between 2012 and 2014 and argued marketing education is an essential aspect of elevating the marketers in their positions. Such training should be in line with the organization expectations from marketing managers to deliver strategic marketing decisions, which is an important part of the complex strategies for development and growth. Milichovsky and Simberova (2015) advised marketing managers to focus on the potential behavior trend of the market by selecting the appropriate metrics that can address the market needs and can reposition the company in the marketplace. Therefore, effectiveness of marketing strategies is an interrelated aspect of business, especially in highly competitive environments.

The marketing strategies of the companies can also affect the financial plans. A strategic alignment between marketing strategies and financial policies may lead to higher profitability for the organizations' leaders (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2013). In other words, the performance of the firms depends on such alignment between different units of an organization including the finance and marketing departments. Marketing capabilities will increase the operational capabilities, and consequently, operational capabilities will increase the financial capabilities (Yu, Ramanathan, & Nath, 2014). Marketing capabilities can affect the export performance of companies positively (Nalcaci & Yagci, 2014; Tan & Sousa, 2015) and influence the social performance of the firms (Liu, Eng, & Takeda, 2015).

Marketing activities have a positive effect on the firms' value (Ryoo, Jeon, & Lee, 2016). In a quantitative study with more than 300 marketing managers of professional firms in manufacturing and service sectors, Ramaseshan, Ishak, and Kingshott (2013) showed the important role of marketing managers in formulating and implementing the strategic decisions, and consequently increasing the firms' performance. Ramaseshan et al. (2013) argued market competitions have a negative effect on the strategy credibility while positively involve the marketing managers in making new strategies. Therefore, marketing managers will influence the overall performance of the firms as long as top managers involve them in the firms' strategic decision-making process.

Marketing capabilities and strategic decisions of marketing managers not only affect the organization's policies but also may influence the customers' decisions. Siahtiri, O'Cass, and Ngo (2014) explored the role of marketing capabilities in delivering critical customer-centric performance through studying 140 senior managers of business-to-business (B2B) firms. The findings of the study showed both marketing capabilities (MC) and sales capabilities (SC) of marketing and sales units in B2B markets have a considerable influence on getting customers, retaining them, and making them satisfied. Firms' managers should reinforce the marketing capabilities, especially in facing with new product development (NPD) to ensure their advancements are in line with customer-centric strategies (Mu, 2015). Such approach requires an alignment between marketing strategies and the needs of marketplaces to be able to cope with the market changes. The success of the marketing strategies relies on the ability of the firms' leaders in aligning their innovation capabilities with the pace of changes in technology (Danciu, 2013). However, marketing capabilities mediate the relationship between market orientation and the performance of the firms (Heirati, O'Cass, & Ngo, 2013). The ability of firms' management in embracing the market changes and adopting novel market-orientation policies that can support the innovativeness and creativity is a crucial factor to produce a successful strategy (Božic & Ozretic-Došen, 2015). In other words, being market oriented will not assure higher performance; rather market orientation is the ability of the firms' managers in translating market knowledge to achieve superior performance.

One of the important aspects of any marketing strategy is to consider the effectiveness of marketing strategies in addressing the disruptive elements of today's competitive environment (Filieri, 2015). Cavousgil and Cavousgil (2012) discussed four forces affecting the international marketing namely the huge volatility in the global markets, strenuous engagement with turbulent business environments, the advancement in novel strategies that can cope with shifting market forces, and innovative comprehension of marketing performance. While some MNEs' leaders have managed to transform their organizations, such as Apple, GE, and Tesco, through creative ways, some others have struggled to cope with challenges of new technologies, addressing the customers' expectations, and reflecting on government conventions (Cavousgil & Cavousgil, 2012). In all cases, a comprehensive understanding of the changes and development of fast response, in addition to strategies for risk mitigation are key parameters in distinguishing surviving companies from those facing extinction.

Focusing on objectives of the business units may influence the marketing strategy creativity and effectiveness. Slater, Hult, and Olson (2010) studied the effect of environmental condition on marketing strategy creativity and implementation effectiveness and showed that environmental changes had a small effect on the organizations' performance. Marketing manager should direct the organization's activities towards the proper focus when they face constraints such as culture, resources, or skills and integrate different functions of the firm (Slater et al. 2010). Slater et al. argued that quality of communication among firms' functions, managers' commitment to the firms' visions, and managers' focus on the company's objectives have positive impression on the creativity in marketing strategies and marketing strategy implementation effectiveness.

Marketing strategies that involve brands into the lives of consumers by building value-based relationships seem to favor some companies. Graffigna and Gambetti (2015) studied variety of brands from luxury to mass-market and argued that consumers weigh more on brands that they can emotionally connect with them. As a result, marketing managers should design their marketing strategies in a way that consumers feel interpersonal relationships with particular products or services. Partner linking, customer engagement, and marketing sensing are three dimensions that could affect the power of adaptation of companies to the external market changes (Mu, 2015). The closer the marketing strategies target the customers' wants, the greater the chance of maintaining current customers and attracting new ones. Therefore, marketing strategies should create an emotional band between consumers and the products and services of the firms.

Another common practice in marketing strategy is direct selling. Ragland, Brouthers, and Widmier (2015) studied a sample of 51 nations across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America representing 91% of global GDP and found direct selling is not identical across different countries. Countries from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America showed higher level of market attractiveness and higher degree of direct selling performance for the companies that expand their business into these regions (Ragland et al., 2015). Findings of Ragland et al. indicated some business models such as direct selling may work better in one marketplace than others, which may affect managers decisions on whether entering a new international market will be profitable or not.

Utilization of advanced technologies such as smart phone applications, Internet, and social media may provide a foundation for managers to develop their marketing strategies via offering state-of-the-art marketing solutions to the customers (Danciu, 2013). Advanced technologies assist both marketers and customers in rectifying their relationships. Royle and Laing (2014) concluded that while public sector primarily used digital technology to encourage more engagement of customers by sharing information, marketers in the private sector used digital marketing as a complementary channel for communication, which allowed them to promote their products and services. Danciu (2013) argued that new business models and activities might emerge because of easier access to worldwide customers through use of gigantic resources of data collection and data analysis. Internet-based technologies have dramatically reduced the total final cost for both sellers and buyers, which have led in higher productivity (Danciu, 2013). Therefore, developing and utilizing advanced Internet-based knowledge is an inevitable part of marketing management and marketing strategies.

Although using novel technologies and Internet provides powerful tools for marketing managers in developing their strategies, the role of customers in response and use of the same technologies is important. In a qualitative study across US, France, and UK, Holliman and Rowley (2014) found using technologies such as social media and Internet web pages had a significant influence in building trust and ensuring sustainability of the business-to-business relationships. Organizations' marketers require acquiring new sets of skills, competencies, and tactics to develop novel strategies. Aligning the marketing managers' competencies with the pace of the marketplace changes is in agreement with the findings of Holliman and Rowley that emphasized on firms' managers' obligation in identifying a variety of objectives such as brand building, brand awareness, and creating trust for developing the best marketing strategies that can answer the clients' needs. Royle and Laing (2014) revealed skills such as technical competencies and strategic integration are the key missing proficiencies marketers need to develop. Lack of a solid practice guideline for the best-in-class practices, lack of clear standard for evaluation measures, and shortage in future-proofing capabilities in dealing with rapid changes in the marketplaces are some of the main areas for progress (Royle & Laing, 2014).

Sales Performance

The success of an organization is the ultimate goal of all its departments and segments, which requires a close collaboration among all business units. Mohammadzadeh et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of having comprehensive collaboration among different segments of an organization including marketing and finance to enhance the overall performance. The complexity and volatility of the marketplaces have raised the necessity for cooperative collaboration among different disciplines within an organization. Organic forms of organizational culture will enhance the overall performance (Wei, Samiee, & Lee, 2013). Findings of a mixed method study in the oil and gas industry expressed the relationship between agile supply chain and business performance across United Kingdom North Sea upstream oil and gas industry (Yusuf et al., 2014). A significant relationship presents between competitive objectives, business performance, and the agility of the delivery system in the oil and gas industry, which affects the profitability of the corporates (Yusuf et al., 2014). Hence, marketers should involve other department managers while making marketing strategies to ensure the alignment of the organization as a system.

One of the other parameters that can influence the firms' performance is sustainability (Yusuf et al., 2013). Developing strategies for sustaining a business in the oil and gas industry is not a task for an individual company rather is a collective task for individuals, businesses, governments, and multilateral agencies. Some companies suffer from lack of a solid sustainability plan in the marketing strategies, in particular, small companies do not have the sufficient financial and technical resources to develop their sustainability programs, and require support from the industry giants, international agents, or governments (Yusuf et al., 2013). A sustainable marketing strategy requires a sustainable business unit that can support both short-term and long-term plans.

With emergence of the Internet and promotion of novel means of communication, marketing has entered a new era of development. Many marketers have upgraded their strategies from using traditional channels of communications towards social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Oztamur, & Karakadilar, 2014). Organizations' leaders started using Internet in their marketing practices because of its ability to improve business processes, increase communication efficiency among all stakeholders, and get edge over competitors (Apăvăloaie, 2014). There is no geographical or time limit for innovation and utilization of online facilitators in promoting a business (Apăvăloaie, 2014). Innovation will give significant edge over competitors by giving specific orientation to the marketing strategies (Božic & Ozretic-Došen, 2015). Novel technologies have led to new tools and techniques that were not available to marketers over a decade ago. Therefore, marketers who can adopt such technologies properly will get advantages over their market rivals.

Legitimacy and trustworthiness of the marketing strategies is an essential factor in sustaining the sales performance of the firms. Yang and Su (2014) found positive relationship between legitimacy and efficiency of the firms. The way that regulations determine the marketing key performance indicators for a particular business influences the organizations' establishment in the market (Doherty, Chen, & Alexander, 2014). Such key indications may differ from one industry to another and can vary across different geographical locations. However, regardless of the nature of the industry, the level of trustworthiness is in connection with authorities' perception on firms' legitimacy and consequently affects the relationship between authorities and organizations' leaders. As indicated by Doherty et al., meeting the industry key performance indicators will assist companies' management in promoting their products and services.

Marketing and sales forces' capabilities may also affect the sales performance and enhance the profitability. Both marketing capabilities (MC) and sales capabilities (SC) of marketing and sales units in B2B markets have considerable effect on getting customers, retaining them, and making them satisfied (Siahtiri, O'Cass, & Ngo, 2014). Having greater capabilities in marketing and sales will potentially increase the competitive advantages in the marketplace. Siahtiri et al. concluded sales capability is a superior driver for customer centric performance (CCP) while market orientation has moderate effect on the relationship between marketing and sales capabilities and customer centric performance. The stronger the customer centric performance (CCP), the higher the brand performance. However, during the economic downturns, the role of operational capabilities is more than the marketing skills (Ahmed et al., 2014). The study outcomes identified that during the economic growth, leaders of the organizations that gave more weight to the operations and marketing functions will see a higher performance (Ahmed et al., 2014). Hence, while operational and marketing capabilities are a source of competitive advantage, organizations' leaders should pay attention in developing strategies that can enhance the firms' profitability according to the market condition. Lages, Mata, and Griffith (2013) argued continual learning and analysis processes by managers is a key to ensure a steady performance.

Sales performance of international companies is in connection to some other parameters such as level of entrepreneurial orientations, customer oriented selling, and absorptive capacity. Javalgi, Hall, and Cavusgil (2014) found a positive relationship between corporate entrepreneurial orientations, customer oriented selling, and international sales performance in the B2B setting. Therefore, during the process of designing the marketing strategies for a company, marketers should consider the nature of the organization and the vision of the leaders to be able to provide the most effective strategies. Specificity of the industry, geographical distributions, and particular settings of business units within the company may influence the strategies (Kafouros & Wang, 2015). Cultural diversity may also affect the internationalization and consequently shake the sales performance. A positive relationship exists between sales performance and the cultural diversity for the multinational enterprises that operate in countries with similar cultures, while the relationship is negative for multinational companies that operate in culturally diverse countries (De Jong & van Houten, 2014; Peterson, Kushwaha, & Kumar, 2015).). However, inefficiency in resource allocation during an increase in internationalization may offset the positive effect (De Jong & van Houten, 2014).

Salespeople have a long-lasting, direct, and intimate relationship with customers and are the initial face of the organizations in the customers’ office. Therefore, whereas marketing strategies are critical in promoting a product or service, per se, marketing strategies cannot guarantee the success of the business and efficient and capable salespeople are an integral part of the system. The proficiency and perceptions of the salespeople affect the profitability of the organizations (Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, & Boichuk, 2014). Karanja, Sma, and Thuo (2014) discussed that sales and marketing managers need to encourage their companies’ leaders in dedicating special budget for training the sales team to enhance their marketing skills, which enables them to identify the market needs, trends, and requirements for new products and services. Also, building a stronger relationship between marketing and sales teams will enhance the profitability

(Wiersema, 2013). Salespeople, as the face of the company, gather the required data that marketing managers should translate it to the knowledge, as a competitive advantage resource (Denicolai, Zucchella, & Strange, 2014). In addition, there should be compensation and incentive plans to motivate salespeople to develop their capabilities and extend their support to the customers (Karanja et al., 2014). A capable salesforce will facilitate the flow of marketing strategies.

Because of heterogeneity of the business environments, having a one-size-fits-all approach across all marketplaces is not possible. Therefore, managers should train their salespeople to use variety of techniques and tactics to increase the sales performance (Terho et al., 2015). Understanding the customers' business models, creating value proposition, and communicating the customers' values are some of the key areas that marketing managers should consider when prioritizing their strategies (Terho et al., 2015). Integrated marketing communication directly and positively affects the brands' performance and, consequently, leads to better financial performance (Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2015). For example, when dealing with high-potential customers, a value-based strategy could be more appropriate than being customer oriented. Since different clients in the oil and gas sector have a wide range of characteristics in their buying centers, marketing managers should familiarize themselves with client's characteristics and needs prior to practicing any marketing strategy.

Some managers prefer to use specific marketing and sales strategies such as drip pricing, price partitioning, or bundle pricing to increase the sales performance. Robbert

(2015) identified drip pricing as a pricing tactic in which organizations' managers advertise only part of the product or service price and express additional charges in the process of purchasing. The extra charges can be in the form of optional add-ons or mandatory surcharges. Robbert described price partitioning a process in which businesspersons divide the total price into a base price for the main product and one or more surcharges. Compared to partitioned pricing, drip pricing negatively influenced the consumer's decisions in terms of perceived deception, perceived value, and buying intentions (Robbert, 2015). Repetti, Roe, and Gregory (2015) found bundle pricing is a preferred choice for the majority of the customers in the hotel and resort industry. While for those consumers who pay less attention to the price, drip pricing does not have a significant effect on their perceived value or buying intention, for highly price-conscious consumers perceived value for a particular offer and the purchased intention were lower (Robbert, 2015). Therefore, knowing the buying center attitude is essential for marketers to design their strategies accordingly. For example, Chahal, Dangwal, and Rania (2014) and Dean and Pacheco (2014) argued overall tendency of the marketplaces towards green marketing has a direct influence on the performance of the companies in terms of bigger market share, higher sales growth, and greater profitability. Consequently, marketing managers should develop their marketing strategies in accordance to general direction of the market.

The dynamics of marketplaces necessitates a high level of flexibility and innovation in marketing strategies. Innovative organizational culture, which encourages employees to develop innovative ideas, products, and dynamic thinking, will give rise to delivering positive results (Toaldo, Didonet, & Luce, 2013). Innovativeness and adaptation of marketing strategies are two primary contributors in the performance of the firms (Hallback & Gabrielsson, 2013). Emergent marketing strategies will enhance the performance of the firms but have a little effect on the hard aspects (i.e. product and distribution) of the marketing strategy (Chari, Katsikeas, Balabanis, & Robson, 2014). Emergent marketing strategies means developing new ideas and approaches based on the changes in the market demands. Chari et al. argued one-size-fits-all strategy is not suitable for uncertain markets in which there is a need for more flexible approaches. The uncertainties of the external environment may require regular updates in marketing strategies. In a quantitative study across UK, Zeriti, Robson, Spyropoulou, and Leonidou, (2014) found differences exist between home and export markets in terms of economic, competitiveness, technology, customer type, and the desire of the stakeholders in perceiving the business operation and adapting marketing strategies. These external environmental factors were influential on the fit and performance of the organizations. Changes in the oil price, for example, imposes a threat for oil companies, and entails novel marketing strategies.

Internal pressures such as performance decline, will also affect the marketing decisions. Some managers tend towards certain decisions during the performance decline period that can affect their managerial effectiveness and increase their risk-taking power (Chng, Shih, Rodgers, & Song, 2015). In such downturn conditions, marketing managers play a key role in directing the company towards the right route. Chng et al. argued managers should improve their managerial self-regulation capabilities by raising their awareness. Therefore, business leaders should ensure their managers have consistent and up-to-date trainings that can prepare them for any unexpected changes, either internally or externally.

Marketing managers should consider the short-term and long-term effects of brand equity in their marketing strategies, which in turn, will affect the profitability of the firms. Mizik (2014) argued brand equity could affect the firms' financial performance based on the marketing strategies that organizations' leaders choose. According to Mizik, analyzing and understanding such effect would assist marketers to avoid underinvesting the value-generating process of the brand. In other words, marketing managers should consider the short-term and long-term effects of brand equity during the creation of marketing strategies to develop strategies that can leverage brand equity and financial performance of the company. Davcik and Sharma (2015) found brand equity as a pillar for sustaining the pricing strategy of the firms, which in turn will influence the profitability and revenue.

Marketing strategy, as a holistic blend of an organization's management effort, may have an influence on the financial performance and profitability of the organization. Shin (2013) studied some independent businesses across Korea and found managers can enhance the profitability of the firms by implementing market information into the business strategies. In another study, Mitchell and Olsen (2013) found utilization of marketing metrics would leverage the firms’ performance through providing better analysis of marketplaces and enabling a more accurate profitability forecast. Business executives of the organizations can elevate the profitability by ensuring a continual engagement of market assessment information and customers behavior in all business decisions (Groenewald, Prinsloo, & Pelser, 2014). Therefore, using marketing intelligence in strategic decisions of the organization can potentially foster the profitability of a firm.

Variation in products and services may have a positive effect on the sale performance and profitability of the firms. Civic (2013) argued developing new products and remodeling the current designs are useful marketing strategies to enhance the competitiveness of a firm. Chen and Liu (2013) discussed generating product marketing gatekeepers would leverage the profitability of the firms. However, new products should be in line with customers’ expectations to protect their profit and loyalty. Kumar, Sharma, Shah, and Rajan (2013) found increased profitable customers would maintain loyalty, and consequently, would raise the profitability of the firms. Therefore, marketing managers and business executives should ensure the integration of marketing strategies into decision-making processes to enhance the profitability and sales performance of the organization.

Marketing Strategies of Oilfield Service Companies amid Downturn

Oilfield service companies are providers of services, products, tools, and consultancy to the oil and gas companies, which in turn explore, extract, produce, refine, and distribute oil, gas, and all related products. According to American Marketing Association (2013), marketing includes all activities, plans, and procedures that lead to creation and establishment of communication channels between firms and their clients, customers, partners, and societies through value creation and addressing customers' needs. While the fundamentals of the marketing are the same across almost all industries (Kotler & Keller, 2012), some industry leaders may focus more on a particular aspect of marketing mix or alternatively give more weight to the relationship marketing. Regardless of the business nature, sometimes, lack of enough appropriate information may lead to unknown situation and uncertain business environment (Merigó, Gil-Lafuente, & Gil-Lafuente, 2016). Uncertainty in business may affect the strategic decisions and result in ambiguous market leading to financial crisis.

Global economy has been experiencing series of difficulties throughout the history. Economic recessions not only negatively affect the customer demands and expectations (Kaytaz & Gul, 2014) but also depress the sales of the products, and consequently decline the organization profitability (Bamiatzi, Cavusgil, Jabbour, & Sinkovics, 2014). Decline in product sales due to economic downturn will speed up the processes of organizational changes (Hampson & McGoldrick, 2013). Aligned with such organizational changes, managers strive to modify the sales and marketing strategies to meet new market requirements. According to Brooksbank, Subhan, Garland, and Rader (2015), regardless of the economic conditions, marketing strategists can benefit from basic marketing strategies to facilitate their competitive achievements.

Irrespective of the economic downturn or growth, strategic marketing has a significant role in giving edge over competitors. Rollins, Nickell, and Ennis (2014) argued during the recession period, marketing managers are under a great pressure from top management to cut the marketing spending. Nevertheless, Rollins et al. (2014) asserted a significant part of the pressure for reducing firms' spending is due to customer reduction in expenditure during the recession period. However, marketing managers use variety of marketing strategies to sustain the profitability of their organizations. Brooksbank et al. (2015) argued firms' managers give different priorities to marketing strategies during the recession time comparing to the time of business growth. Notta and Vlachvei (2015) named variety of approaches towards marketing strategies during the economic downturn including offering price discount, delivering higher quality products, customizing services, targeting specific markets, and handling cost reduction methods.

Fluctuations in oil price, as a global commodity, will affect the international markets and influence the corporates investment capabilities. Tayebi and Yazdani (2014) studied a sample of seven oil exporter and importer Asian countries and argued both financial crisis and shocks in the oil price have a direct effect on business trades, at least in the short term. Nickell, Rollins, and Hellman (2013) reviewed 190 samples from both consumer companies and service providers across U.S. and found companies' leaders who managed to maintain their existing customer relationships were more successful in surviving the financial crisis. In addition, marketing managers of companies that survived the market downturn successfully developed novel marketing tools such as social media and innovative marketing to overcome the market depression (Nickell et al., 2013). Reallocation of marketing strategies may result in developing innovative marketing approaches. Rollins et al. discussed that firms' marketing managers need to focus on relationship with customers and leverage the marketing effort during the recession. According to Rollins et al., managers who rapidly understand and adapt to the economic downturns, have a great chance to emerge stronger. Therefore, while having a well-planned marketing strategy will potentially highlight the way forward and act as a blueprint, building and retaining a close relationship with customers, clients, and all other stakeholders will act as a survivor during the financial crisis.

In industries like oil and gas, where a huge competition exists, a complex set of factors affects the competing power of the firms and makes the emulation difficult for the rivals. Garcia, Lessard, and Singh (2014) found although assets are one of the most important parameters in differentiating competitors, a combination of tangible and intangible assets drives the firms' strategies and gives edge over competition. One of the main strategies corporate managers seek is to solve client issues by value creation through in-depth understanding of the existing challenges. A comprehensive discernment of the customers' challenges comes from engaging all the integrative dynamic capabilities and developing strategies that are hard to imitate or develop (Garcia et al., 2014). Therefore, based on company's vision, firms' managers strive to develop strategies that put them ahead of the competitors across different marketplaces.

Distribution of oil and gas reserves is not even all around the globe; thus, geopolitical forces push for additional consideration while creating marketing strategies of the firms. Michael (2014) argued market distortion, because of imbalance power of the producers and consumers, has altered the market equilibrium and brought uncertainties in the supply section comparing to the prediction of the demand part. Nevertheless, oilfield service companies seem to be more sensitive to the market volatility in comparison to the production and exploration companies (Michael, 2016). Supply of the oil and gas, in turn, affects the companies' strategies for introducing new projects and expanding ongoing developments. However, according to Michael (2016), conventional and unconventional energy sources influence the sensitivity of the companies towards oil price changes. Hence, in such puzzling situations, senior marketing managers of the oil and gas service companies may find themselves in a challenging position in which conventional approaches will be blemished.

Oil price fluctuations affect activity and investment in the oil and gas industry; consequently, oilfield firms' managers face reduction in revenue and profitability. In the annual market outlook report of British Petroleum (2016), as one of the well-established international companies in the petroleum industry, supply and demand of oil in the global level is predicted to continue to strive for a balance situation in short to medium term, and subsequently, would affect the investments in new exploration projects. Same prediction held true in Statoil energy perspective report (2015), which showed up to 40% deduction in upstream investments in 2015 and predicted the same trend in upstream investment for short to medium terms. When international and national oil companies encounter revenue drop due to low oil price, they put more pressure on oilfield service companies to implement strict cost control activities (Al-Fattah, 2013). Therefore, senior marketing managers of the oilfield service companies will keep facing enormous challenges from both external and internal forces. Civi (2013) asserted firms' leaders should weigh more on aggressive marketing functions during the economic downturn. Understanding the marketing strategies senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies use to enhance the profitability during the downturn period was the main purpose of this doctoral study.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore marketing strategies that senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies used to enhance the profitability of their organizations, especially during the downturn periods. The problem was that some senior marketing managers of ISCOGI across the Middle East lack strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits in periods of declining oil prices. I used a qualitative multiple case study to answer a central research question by targeting the senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies. The conceptual framework of this study was Smith's (1956) model of STP that provided a tool to comprehend the attributes of different segments of a market to tune the marketing strategies accordingly. In addition, Section 1 of this study covered a brief introduction to the nature of the study, explanation of assumptions and limitations, elaborating the significance of the study, and a holistic review of the existing literature pertinent to the research topic.

In Section 2, I provide a detailed description of research methodology and design, target population of the study, sampling method, ethical research considerations, data collection instrument and technique, data organization and analysis process, and identification of the study's reliability and validity. In Section 3, I will present, analyze, and discuss the findings of the study in accordance with the conceptual framework and the literature review. In addition, I will offer some practical recommendations for action followed by the way forward for further research. Last, I will provide a review of the conclusion of the study.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I provide a detailed description of the steps I took to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil field service companies used to enhance the sales performance, revenues, and profit. I discuss why a qualitative multiple case study was best suited to answer my research question and how I, as the data collection instrument, ensured the reliability and validity of the data collection process. Section 2 is composed of the following subsections: (a) purpose statement, (b) role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method, (e) study design, (f) population and sampling, (g) ethical research, (h) data collection, (i) data analysis, and (j) reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies that senior marketing managers of ISCOGI used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. The target population consisted of senior marketing managers who worked in ISCOGI in the Middle East, each with several subsidiaries worldwide. I selected participants from the list of companies attending the annual event of Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference (ADIPEC, 2016), which is one of the world's most influential oil and gas conferences. Participants included marketing managers who successfully used strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits in their corresponding companies during periods of declining oil prices. The overall accomplishments of companies in terms of competitive advantages indicate marketing managers' capability in using successful marketing strategies (Ahmed et al., 2014). The implications for positive social change include the potential for profit sustainability of the corporations and contribution to prosperity of employees' dependents and local communities. Greater sales performance means more operations and further activities that necessitate employment, and, consequently, reduced unemployment rates through interactions within local economies.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher of this qualitative case study was to collect the data from the research participants through interviewing sessions and from reviewing the companies' annual reports and website contents, which were available to the public. In a qualitative study, the primary role of the researcher is to collect the data for future analysis (Collins & Cooper, 2014). I explored the meanings of participants' responses to interview questions and reported them without any bias by using a member checking process in which participants had the opportunity to review my interpretations and make any required corrections. The researcher in a qualitative study acts as an instrument for data collection (Green, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013), analysis, and interpretation of the required data (Cater, Machtmes, & Fox, 2013). In addition to conducting semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, I reviewed available sources of annual reports and companies' archival contents on their websites. Yin (2014) and Balzacq (2014) argued that researchers could minimize bias through validating interview data by employing additional sources.

Before conducting the interviews, I attempted to nurture an authentic relationship with participants through open communication to encourage them to participate in an informative interviewing session. I followed the same order of interview questions for most participants with a variety of open-ended questions that varied regarding the adaptation of questions to the semistructured interview situations. In semistructured interviews, researchers use a variety of forms and a number of questions mostly in a set order but with some degree of flexibility (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Rowley, 2012). Following the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I officially obtained participants' approval for the interview buy offering the interview consent form to each participant and having each participant sign the form. Rowbotham, Astin, Greene, and Cummings (2013) considered a consent form to be a cornerstone on any study related to human research. Montalvo and Larson (2014) stated that the informed consent form should be written at an understandable level for comprehending the research process.

In addition to conducting semistructured interviews with senior marketing managers, I reviewed the companies' annual reports and website contents. Using secondary sources of information enriches the data quality of the study (Yin, 2014). Therefore, a higher quality of information reduced my bias in data collection and analysis.

In a qualitative study, the researcher has a large degree of freedom in selecting the research method for data collection, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the data (Bansal & Corley, 2012). I followed the research guidelines of *The Belmont Report*, outlining the respect for justice, beneficence, and persons (U.S. Department of Health & Human Service [USDHHS], 1979). *The Belmont Report* includes three main principles such as the necessity of individuals' consent to partake in the study and right protection of children and individuals with diminished abilities, minimizing the risk and maximizing the benefit of participants, and treating the participants fairly (USDHHS, 1979). To ensure the protection of participants' rights, I submitted my application form to the Walden University Institute Review Board (IRB) for approval. Having standard certificates of confidentiality protection increases the likelihood of participation (Beskow, Check, & Ammarell, 2014; Wolf et al., 2015). The process to prevent a person's identity from being used to connect with information is called de-identification, which includes privacy for research participants completing human subject studies and their affiliated organization (Deleger et al., 2014). Moreover, obtaining official certificates that protect researchers from revealing participants' identity will increase participants' confidence on privacy protection (Check, Wolf, Dame, & Beskow, 2014). Therefore, I completed the web-based training course of the National Institute of Health (NIH) Office of External Research under the title of *Protecting Human Research Participants* with certificate number 1719790 on March 9, 2015 (see Appendix B).

Researcher bias may influence different phases of study including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Use of semistructured interviews with open-ended questions reduces and mitigates bias (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2015). I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions as primary source of data collection. Researchers should identify the sources of personal bias from their previous experiences on the topic, as well as the assumptions and factors that can limit the level of bias (Anderson & Hartzler, 2014; Snelgrove, 2014; Yin, 2014). Researchers' knowledge about marketing may add some value to their understanding of the importance of marketing strategies on the organization's performance (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). My personal experiences in the oil and gas industry as a senior petroleum engineer who has experienced the technical sales and marketing positions assisted me in a better understanding of the topic and enriching the content of the research. However, it might make me vulnerable against preconceptions and prejudgments. Using memory information may increase the tendency of bias judgments (Fay & Montague, 2015; Malone, Nicholl, & Tracey, 2014). Therefore, I was vigilant throughout the study from research design to data collection and data analysis to avoid forcing the findings to align with my background.

I applied the bracketing technique to minimize the research bias throughout the study. Bracketing gives researchers the ability to increase the rigor of the study and improve the process of data analysis (Chan et al., 2013; Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). In bracketing technique, researchers keep aside their personal experiences on the research topic to avoid influencing customers' insights. During interview sessions, researcher's bias may divert interview towards incorrect predisposition (Cairney & St Denny, 2015). Šimundić (2013) considered bias as a misleading factor that may result in false conclusions. To achieve the goal of refraining the researcher bias, I took notes during collecting the data, as well as data analysis phase. Also, open-ended questions gave more flexibility to participants to talk about their experiences. Roulston and Shelton (2015) recommended researchers to use reflective journaling techniques during the data collection phase to mitigate the potential personal bias. Reflective journaling is a method for increasing researchers' cognitive understanding of events that happened by extracting in-mind thoughts and ideas (Burns, 2016; Herrington, Parker, & Boase-Jelinek, 2014). Researchers benefit from reflective journaling by leveraging critical thinking and improving thinking skills (Padden-Denmead, Scaffidi, Kerley, & Farside, 2016). In addition, Ruiz-López et al. (2015) argued reflective journaling is a way to gather experiences and identify personal reflections in information gathering. I used reflective journaling alongside field notes to have a detail and comprehensive track of all events and observations during interview sessions and reviewing the companies' annual reports.

Moreover, I requested all research participants to review my transcripts and interpretations to ensure the accuracy and correctness of the content. Member checking is a technique that researchers use to ensure data saturation and increase the credibility and reliability of the research (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). During the member checking, researcher submits their interpretation or transcripts of interview sessions to the participants, and follows up with them to acknowledge the completeness and accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012; Reilly, 2013). Researchers can benefit from transcription process to explore new themes and ideas (Charmaz, 2015). Researchers should be reflexive to research participants to ensure the subjectivity. Groven and

Engelsrud (2013) discussed researchers' reflexivity during data collection phase means continuously evaluating the perception and bias of the researcher and avoiding introduction of any personal bias. Reflexivity is a way of promoting critical thinking (Zori, 2016). Rubin and Rubin (2012) argued that following the research participants during the data collection, rather than leading the conversation, might reduce the influence of the personal bias in interpreting participants' responses.

To assure the ethics of the research, following an interview protocol is an inevitable task (Foley & O'Conner, 2013). I prepared and employed a substantive interview protocol (see Appendix A). An interview protocol is a defined plan for conducting the interview and provides an instruction for a systematic progression. Researchers use interview protocols to expedite the focus during the interview and improve the replication of the process (Elbanna, 2013). Labaree (2014) considered interview protocols as a guide for setting a logical process of data collection and data interpretation. The interview protocol is necessary to ensure consistent and thorough questions that would not lead the participant (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). An interview protocol will give me the chance to learn about the strategies that senior marketing managers of the service companies in the oil and gas industry use to enhance their sales performance. I audiotaped the whole interview and assigned a unique code to each participant on top of the interview sheet. Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) argued researchers should allocate unique codes for each respondent to ensure privacy protection. Next, I asked the interview questions and requested participants to provide as detail and complete answers as they can. At the end of the interview session, I acknowledged the participants contribution to my study and promised them a copy of the interview transcripts for their further review. The interview protocol I used is in Appendix A.

Participants

The population of my study included senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies engaging in activities across the Middle East. Accessing a fraction of the target population of the study is an initial stage of selecting the participants (DiGaetano, 2013). I selected participants based on the list of companies attending the annual event of Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference (ADIPEC, 2016), as one of the world's most influential oil and gas conferences. The potential participants partook in my study as experts in marketing and did not represent their corresponding companies. A purposeful selection of participants allows researchers to ensure participants have relevant information on the research topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Poulis, Poulis, & Plakoyiannaki, 2013). Main eligibility criterion for participants of my doctoral study was being a senior marketing manager of an international service company in the oil and gas industry in the Middle East who successfully used strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. According to Ahmed et al. (2014), the overall accomplishment of companies in terms of competitive advantages is an indication of marketing managers' capability in using successful marketing strategies.

My plan was to approach potential participants throughout the ADIPEC exhibition and acquire participants' contact information upon their preliminary agreement on partaking in my study. After receiving the initial consent of the participants, I initiated an introductory email to establish the relationship with those meeting my research criteria. Sending initial emails will increase a researcher's chance to establish a relationship with potential participants (Byrne et al., 2016). I possessed no direct business or personal interaction or relationship with any of the participants. Before gaining access to the target participants, I got the approval of the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure I followed the appropriate ethical process and protect human rights. I sent invitation letters to the prospective participants via email, explaining my intention for the study. Also, I attached a consent form to the invitation email and asked participants to review and digitally sign the consent form. Alternatively, participants could express their consent by reply to my email. Consent form comprised of a brief expression about background of my doctoral research, purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the participation, any possible risk, and privacy policies. After 5 days, I sent a reminder email to those participants who had not responded to my invitation email. After receiving the participants' approval for participation, I contacted each of the participants via telephone to adjust a suitable date and time for conducting the interview sessions.

My key strategy to establish a working relationship was to build a circle of trust with my participants. Researchers should treat participants with respect (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013), and be honest with participants about the purpose of the study (Rubin &

Rubin, 2012). According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), researchers should be honest in expressing the outcomes of the study and try to establish a relationship with participants based on mutual trust (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, their companies, and their brand names by using pseudonyms. Because of my background as a petroleum engineer with 15 years of experience in the oil and gas industry, participants felt more comfortable to talk about their experiences and stories with regard to the research question. Researchers experienced with the topic may increase the participants' willingness to speak openly and honestly about the research subject (Unluer, 2012). Deepening the knowledge on the research topic might reduce the chance of facing any involuntary bias.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

A qualitative research was the method of this study to explore the marketing strategies that senior marketing managers of the international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the sales performance of their company. Choosing the most appropriate method is critical for a successful study (Bamkin, Maynard, & Goulding, 2016). A qualitative methodology gives the researchers the chance to explore information based on individual perspectives of participants (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Nassaji, 2015; Tong, Winkelmayer, & Craig, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Researchers use the qualitative method to comprehend the topic and explore the subject based on the facts that study participants are experiencing (Barnham, 2014; Hazzan & Nutov, 2014;

Sandelowski, 2015; Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative measures provide a basis to embrace the events as they are, so the authenticity of the phenomenon will remain intact (Shelton et al., 2014). Also, researchers use qualitative method to uncover trends in opinions and thoughts for a deeper understanding of the problems (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013; Upjohn et al., 2013). Furthermore, in a qualitative method, researchers can gain detailed experiences from a small group of participant (Powell & Eddleston, 2013), in which the quality of the researcher is of high importance (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). In this study, I aimed to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance their profitability and increase the market share; therefore, a qualitative approach was appropriate for addressing the study purpose.

A quantitative method was not a proper method for this study because of the nature of the quantitative approach. The aim of a quantitative approach is to meet the objectives and specific outcomes by utilizing standard instruments for data collection, as well as implementing statistical models (Shelton et al., 2014). Researchers use a quantitative study to describe numerical changes via assessing the variables (Harrison, 2013; Karanja, Zaveri, & Ahmed, 2013), generalize the results, test the hypotheses, and find the causal relationships (Wisdom et al., 2012). Moreover, numerical data from quantitative research method is more suitable to validate the extant hypotheses and generalize the findings to a larger scale of population (Shelton et al., 2014), which was not the intent of this study. Yin (2014) argued using quantitative research method may not provide the researchers the chance of using in-depth and probing questions; therefore, the researcher's understanding of the phenomena may remain superficial. A mixed method or a hybrid method is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research questions (Gelling, 2014; Harrison, 2013). Mixed method researchers require a widespread level of experience in research and should allocate an extensive amount of time for data processing (Venkatesh et al., 2013). Researchers use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method methodologies when addressing problems (Palinkas et al., 2015). However, since the aim of this doctoral study was not to examine the relationship between different variables and factors, quantitative and mixed methods methodologies would have not been appropriate for exploring the strategies that marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the sales performance, revenues, and profits.

Research Design

I employed a multiple case study design to collect required information from my purposeful sample of senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies located in the Middle East. Researchers design their studies to explore the research question and direct the study towards conclusions that lead to a final report (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Researchers use a case study to build a foundation based on previous theoretical propositions and collect the required data according to a predefined guideline (Hyett et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2013). Cronin (2014) discussed a case study is a rigourous and systematic approach in research studies. There are several qualitative designs such as case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry (Erickson, 2012; Petty et al., 2012; Rowley, 2012). However, I used a case study design to comprehend the marketing strategies that marketing managers use to enhance profitability. Researchers utilize case study design to explore more in-depth information about a phenomenon (Thyme, Wiberg, Lundman, & Graneheim, 2013; Yazan, 2015). Baškarada (2014) argued case study design is suitable for research related to business, marketing, political science, operations management, and similar fields of study.

Evaluating of all available research designs underpined the choice of case study as the preferred design for my doctoral research. Researchers use phenomenological studies to find out how people interpret and comprehend the true meaning of their lived experiences (Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016; Hills, 2015; Jardim, 2015); therefore, I might not be able to produce the relevant results by implementing phenomenology. The aim of the narrative design is to study the life stories of a single individual (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Safari & Thilenius, 2013). Narrative research is appropriate for unfolding the experience of one or more individuals in a chronological manner (Beattie, 2014; Loh, 2013; Wolgemuth, 2014); hence, narrative design is helpful in story-telling processes rather than getting an in-depth understanding of an issue; thus, I did not select a narrative design. Grounded theory is an appropriate design when researchers aim to generate a new theory (Cooke, 2014; Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osuji, 2014; Khan, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Thomas, 2012), which was not applicable to my doctoral study in which I attempted to explore the phenomenon using STP as my conceptual framework rather than creating a new theory. Ethnography design has similarities with grounded theory with a focus on the cultural aspects of the study (Zhu & Bargiela-Ciappini, 2013). I excluded ethnography since I did not intend to explore the cultural features of the marketing strategy.

The approach for the proposed study was a qualitative case study method to explore strategies senior marketing managers of ISCOGI in the Middle East used to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. The case study design allows the exploration of the phenomenon and understanding the way it works (Gee, Loewnthal, & Cayne, 2013). Perry (1998) argued that case study design is a proper research design to study the contemporary subjects, especially when little literature is available on the specific topic. Although marketing strategies in international companies may not seem to be a new topic; however, little published research exists on marketing strategies for the international oil and gas service companies. Particularly, advancements in technology and emerging challenges in the marketplaces call for novel and innovative strategies built upon previous experiences. Therefore, a case study was provide me the opportunity to get in-depth insights and find a holistic view of the phenomenon.

The case study is a rigorous design to perform a research on marketing-related topics (Perry, 1998). The aim of a qualitative case study is to have a rich and comprehensive description of a phenomenon through collecting sufficient and quality data (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013). To assure the quality of the data, I used a variety of resources and techniques to collected the required data. Therefore, in addition to using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, I reviewed companies' annual reports and publicly available information on companies' websites. Methodological triangulation is a tactic in which researcher integrates multiple sources of data such as interview, archives, company annual reports, and observations to comprehend the results (Balzacq, 2014; Denzin, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013). I interviewed five senior marketing managers of ISCOGI. However, I was open to invite more participants, if required, in case I could not reach data saturation status with the initial five participants. Data saturation is a stage in the research in which no new information is emerging and the same pattern is visible among the responses (Meyer & Ward, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Once the interview sessions were complete, I forwarded the summary of interview interpretations to the participant, as part of member checking, to review and acknowledge the correctness and accuracy of my interpretation. Houghton et al. (2013) explained member checking as a technique that researchers use to ensure data saturation and increase the credibility of the interview transcripts.

Population and Sampling

The population for this qualitative case study included senior marketing managers of ISCOGI working in the Middle East, who successfully used strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits in their corresponding companies during periods of declining oil prices. The overall accomplishment of companies in terms of competitive advantages is an indication of marketing managers' capability in using successful marketing strategies (Ahmed et al., 2014). To explore the specific business problem, I used purposeful snowball sampling based on the predetermined criterion for selection of participants in my doctoral study. I started with five participants and was ready to continue to add more participants until I reached data saturation. Researchers use snowball sampling to reach more participants, who are information rich and knowledgeable about the research topic based on referrals from existing participants (Colvin, Witt, & Lacey, 2016; Li, 2014; Patton, 2015; Waters, 2015; Yin, 2015).

Researchers leverage the credibility of the study by using purposeful snowball sampling (Cin & Walker, 2013). Researchers utilize purposeful sampling to assure engagement of participants with the most appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of the research topic (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Poulis et al., 2013; Wan & Ng, 2013). In purposive sampling, researchers select participants deliberately according to a set of predefined criteria (Konig & Waistell, 2012). Purposeful sampling is superior to random sampling in terms of being less expensive and more targeting the study purpose (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigma, 2013). Moreover, researchers use purposive sampling when access to the whole population is impossible (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2014; Bodlaj & Rojšek, 2014). Therefore, a purposeful snowball sampling was a proper sampling technique in understanding the marketing strategies that marketing managers in international oil and gas service companies use.

To select the most knowledgeable participants, I conducted a purposeful sampling using in-advance set of criteria. Predetermined criteria for deliberately selecting the participants is one of the key aspects of a purposive sampling (Konig & Waistell, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Main eligibility criterion for selecting the participants for my doctoral study was being a senior marketing manager of an international service company in the oil and gas industry in the Middle East who successfully used strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. The overall accomplishment of companies in terms of competitive advantages is an indication of marketing managers' capability in using successful marketing strategies (Ahmed et al., 2014). Selection of senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies provided the opportunity to explore the holistic strategies they used to enhance the sales performance, increase the revenues, and boost the profits.

Interview with participants in a qualitative case study is an appropriate method for collecting rich data (Yin, 2014). In semistructured or unstructured interviews, researchers can improvise probing questions to their prepared questions to gain additional information (Jamshed, 2014; Ross & Blumenstein, 2015). I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews and inquire participants' insights on the research topic. Cotter et al. (2015) argued that interview setting might influence the participation rate. Interview setting can influence the quality of interview session in qualitative research studies (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). I directed all interview sessions in participants' offices to ensure their comfort and privacy, and avoid any unintentional distraction by surrounding environment. Conducting interviews in public places may jeopardize the confidentiality of the interview process (Easterling & Johnson, 2015). Interviews could be within or outside of the business hours based on participants' working schedule and convenience; however, participants fixed the exact timing during the pre-interview contact that I made prior to interview due date. Although the period for each interview session was estimated to be 30-45 minutes, I gave participants enough time to respond freely. Alsulami, Scheepers, and Rahim (2016) argued that dedicating sufficient time to research participants would lead to more in-depth responses. Researchers should try to minimize the stress of participants due to negative impact of stress on participants' perception during the interview sessions (Sharma & Gedeon, 2014).

Although I planned to interview five senior marketing managers as the sample size for collecting data, I was ready to continue adding more participants until reaching data saturation stage. More sample size does not necessarily mean a richer study (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013); however, having the adequate number of samples is crucial for any successful study (Ward, Vaughn, Burney, & Ostbye, 2016). Rowley (2012) believed that a sufficient number of participants in case studies to be between one and 10 members. Researchers can justify any sample size based on contextual evidence and scientific depth of the investigation for a particular study (Boddy, 2016). Defining the sample universe, sample size, sample strategy, and sourcing cases are the most challenging steps in conducting an interview-based qualitative study (Robinson, 2014). Researchers have the chance to start their study with any number of participants and later tailor the participant size to reach the optimized data collection. Accessing a fraction of the target population of the study is important in preparing a list of potential future participants (Dykema, Jones, Piche, & Stevenson, 2013). Marshal et al. (2013) argued the literature contains a vast variety in the number of interviews in qualitative studies. In a qualitative study to explore disruptive marketing, Kirchner, Ford, and Mottner (2012) interviewed five participants including executive directors and marketing managers of nonprofit organizations using semistructured interviewing sessions.

In qualitative studies, researchers aim to collect sufficient data to ensure the report on the study findings is thorough and rich (O'Reilly & Parket, 2013). Although initial number of participants was five, I anticipated the need to add more participants to achieve data saturation in case data saturation could not be achieved during the first five interview sessions. Researchers reach data saturation when no new idea is emerging on the phenomena under investigation, and the same patterns appear from different interview sessions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, the number of participants is enough only when the information coming from research participants become repetitive (Dworkin, 2012). O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2013) emphasized on the importance of collecting data from various cases and reaching data saturation. Researchers should have provision of their sample size prior to embark their study (Robinson, 2014). The initial number of participants for my doctoral study included five senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies.

I forwarded my interpretation of interview contents to individual participants for member checking. Houghton et al. (2013) considered member checking as a technique for assuring the accuracy and completeness of the transcripts. Member checking is a technique that researchers use to ensure data saturation and increase the credibility of the research (Marshall et al., 2013). Morse, Lowery, and Steury (2014) argued that data saturation for each interview session occurs when a repetitive trend exists in responses and there is no additional information to acquire. I planned to continue data collection for my study until no new information emerges from participants, which would be the state of data saturation.

Ethical Research

Ethical considerations are an integral part of any research involving human subject (Drake, 2014; Vainio, 2013). Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, and Khodyakov (2015) discussed the importance of determination of ethical level in a research. Therefore, participants should know whether the focus of the ethical research is to protect the subject or the participant. Avasthi, Ghosh, Sarkar, and Grover (2013) stated each participants must receive information regarding the risks and benefits of the research. All researchers have an individual and collective responsibility to ensure ethical practice and responsibility in ensuring compliance by all participants (Kaye et al., 2015; Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013). There are some common factors in all ethical researches including confidentiality, harm prevention, informed consent, protection of vulnerable populations, and voluntary nature of participation (Kendall & Halliday, 2014; Morse &

Coulehan, 2015; Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2013). According to *The Belmont Report* (U.S. Department of Health & Human Service [USDHHS], 1979), three principles of research ethics consist of: (a) respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice. Whitley and Kite (2013) used the same components for categorizing an ethical research. Respect and justice refer to the voluntary nature of participation, freedom of withdrawal at any stage, and informed consent, while beneficence entails protection of vulnerable populations and confidentiality (Whitley & Kite, 2013). Respecting the ethical practices, not only protect the researchers but also minimizes the harms, preserve the integrity, and impart trust throughout the study (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). Barket (2013) found trust as the most significant factor in a relationship between a researcher and a participant. I considered all these factors throughout the data collection stage.

All participants received a letter of invitation via email explaining the intent and nature of this study. The invitation letter included the consent form that gives participants the chance to read and come back with any potential question pertinent to the study. Consent forms comprises of vital information indicating the risks associated with participation in the study (Cook, Hoas, & Joyner, 2013; Kawar, Pugh, & Scruth, 2016). The consent form contained a brief introduction to my doctoral study, the purpose of the study, interview procedure, sample of interview questions, a statement on the voluntary nature of the participation, the right of participant to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, and data privacy and confidentiality. Bull et al. (2013) and Dixon (2015) discussed the necessity of indicating the voluntary nature of the study in the consent form. Hadidi, Lindquist, Treat-Jacobson, and Swanson (2013) argued that as soon as participants sign the consent form, they agree to the terms and conditions indicated in the form including the voluntary nature of the participation and freedom of withdrawal throughout the study. Rowbotham et al. (2013) considered a consent form to be a cornerstone on any study related to human research. All participants receive the consent form to see the research process along with the interview questions for the study (Bristol & Hicks, 2013). The consent form of my doctoral study included my contact detail and the phone and email address of the Walden University representative.

Should any of the participants desire to withdraw from my study, they could call me at any time after receiving the invitation letter. Alternatively, participants could inform me about withdrawal decision verbally during the interview session or within 2 days after the interview. Having the right to withdraw from the study will improve the trust and transparency of the research (Kaye et al., 2015). Upon expressing their willingness to withdraw from the study, participants would receive a copy of their interviewing notes and transcripts, in case participants already attended the interview session. Since the nature of the participation in a study is voluntary (Whitley & Kite, 2013), there was no penalty or negative consequences for any withdrawal (Bull et al., 2013; Judkins-Cohn, Kielwasser-Withrow, Owen, & Ward, 2014). Should participants choose to withdraw from the study within 2 days after the interview session, I would provide a copy of their interview notes, as well as the audio recording so they had the opportunity to destroy the documents. Providing incentives to participants may raise some concerns about the data quality (Parsons & Manierre, 2014; Robinson, 2014) and even improve the response rate (Bernstein & Feldman, 2015). Some researchers use variety of incentives to motivate participants to partake in the study (Medway & Tourangeau, 2015). Participants did not receive any compensation or gift for their contribution to this doctoral study; however, they received a copy of final results of the study in a two-page executive format for their further information.

Since archiving digital data on hard drives has a limited lifetime (Burda & Teuteberg, 2013), my plan is to store all the recordings, interview transcripts, documents, and research outcomes in a password-protected Dropbox, as well as a Cloud storage, and destroy the files after a period of 5 years. Researchers are responsible to take utmost care of data confidentiality at all stages of data collection, analysis, and storage (Yin, 2014). Respecting the ethical standards ensures maintaining the purpose and intention of the study (Akhavan, Ramezan, & Moghaddam, 2013). Therefore, at all times, research ethics remain an integral part of this doctoral study. Researchers achieve anonymity by modifying participants' recognizable information (Drake, 2014; Vainio, 2013). To maintain the confidentiality of all participants and their corresponding companies and products, I applied a coding process to all files, names, and interview transcripts and used pseudonyms instead such as P1 for participant 1 and C1 for company 1. Prior to data collection, I received the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the following of ethical guidelines and practices. Walden University IRB approval number for this study is 03-03-17-0478713 and it expires on March 2, 2018.

Data Collection Instrument

Data collection is a critical and extensive stage in a qualitative case study to manage different sources of information. I was the primary instrument for data collection in this doctoral study. In qualitative research studies, researchers are the primary instrument because researchers are in the front line to hear, observe, and interpret (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher is in the room with participant as the physical data collection instrument in qualitative studies, an environment that can provide an intricate and inclusive view into participant's responses (Anleu, Blix, Mack, & Wettergren, 2016). There are some principal sources that researchers can use to collect case study substantiation including interviews, archival records, documentations, physical artifacts, direct observation, and participants' observation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014; Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), the more the number of resources, the higher the quality of the case study. Therefore, researchers should make sure they use as many resources as possible for data collection. In qualitative case studies, researchers are the primary instrument for data collection (Camfield & Palmer-Jones, 2013). I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, companies' annual reports, and website archival contents as the primary and secondary resources for my data collection step.

One of the most important aspects of each interviewing session is selecting the right topics to extract the right information (Burnay, Jureta, & Faulkner, 2014). My research topic was the leading subject in developing my interview questions. Interview is one of the most effective techniques for data collection in qualitative studies (Onwuegbuzi & Byers, 2014). However, Netshitangani (2014) believed the quality and skills of the interviewer is superior to the quality of the questions. A variety of methods exists for conducting an interviewing session. Rubin and Rubin (2012) considered semistructured interviews as one of the most common interviewing techniques. Researchers use semistructured interviews to increase the reliability of the study (Seethamraju & Sundar, 2013) and acquire in-depth understanding on the research topic (Esteves, 2014). Morse (2015) noted reliability of the study is improved when results are confirmable through semistructured interviews. In semistructured interviews, researchers have the opportunity to improvise probing questions to the initial prepared questions to gain additional information (Jamshed, 2014). The purpose of my study was to explore the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance their sales performance and increase their revenues and profits. Therefore, I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews and inquired participants' knowledge and experiences on the research topic. Companies' annual reports and archival contents on the companies' websites were the other data collection resources for my doctoral study.

Prior to conducting the data collection phase, I prepared and developed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and adhered to the protocol throughout the interviewing sessions. Following an interview protocol is an inevitable task to ensure the ethics of the study (Foley & O'Conner, 2013) and retain the consistency throughout the interview (Hunter, 2012). Researchers use interview protocols to have more control on their personal bias during the interview sessions (Brown et al., 2013; De Ceunynck, Kusumastuti, Hannes, Janssens, & Wets, 2013). Researchers should keep a power balance within their interview sessions and avoid being dominant to or by research participants (Anyan, 2013). Therefore, following a predesigned protocol provided a means of assurance that neither interviewer nor research participants take full control of the interview session. The duration of each interview was between 30 to 45 minutes except the last interview that lasted 75 minutes because of P5's desire to continue the session and provide further info. The venue was participants' working office to increase the chance for in-site observation, wherever possible. At the interviewing session, I reminded participants about the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. During the interviews, through asking open-ended questions, I encouraged participants to reveal as much information as possible about their experiences on the research topic. I audiotaped all the interviews and send transcripts to participants for correcting any misconception or confusion.

Act of reviewing the transcripts and researcher's interpretation of participants' responses by research participants is part of the member checking process. Member checking is a technique that researchers utilize to ensure data saturation and increase the credibility of the research (Houghton et al., 2013; Koelsch, 2013; Marshall et al., 2013). Using member checking increases the researchers' confidence in the collected data

(Harper & Cole, 2012; Simpson & Quigley, 2016) through considering, comparing, and contrasting participant's responses among others prior to presenting a synthesized product to the participants for member checking. Participants' involvement in data collection gives a chance to reflect on interview responses and sharing more in-depth insights (Cridland et al., 2015). Researchers ask participants to review interview records to verify the accuracy and precision of the transcripts (Alsulami et al., 2016). Harvey (2015) argued that a significant gap in time between data collection and member checking might result in undesirable detachment in participants' connection with their original responses. Therefore, I conducted member checking as soon as possible after summarizing my interpretation of participants' responses in one paragraph for each question. Once I received participants' feedbacks, corrections, and comments on my interpretations summary, I reviewed the summaries with participants individually and applied the required changes. Modifying the interview documents after member checking will increase data reliability and credibility (Faseleh-Jahromi, Moattari, & Peyrovani, 2013; Hudson et al., 2014). Subsequently, I went through my other data collection sources such as companies' annual reports and archived materials on companies' websites.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection process in this multiple case study consisted of several techniques. In-depth interview session was the primary data collection source in my doctoral study to understand what strategies senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the profitability of their enterprises. The secondary sources included the annual reports and contents of the website of the participants' corresponding companies. Interview sessions are the primary and the most important sources of information yet inexpensive and relatively quick way of data collection in case studies (Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Yin, 2014). Interview is one of the most effective techniques for data collection in qualitative studies (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Morse & McEovy, 2014; Wang & Zhu, 2015). Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013) discussed that in face-to-face interviews, researchers have the chance to complete, formulate, and express their understanding of what research participants is talking about. Researchers benefit from face-to-face interviews through understanding participants' experiences and expand the findings to the real world (Pacho, 2015; Peters & Halcomb, 2015). Pugh (2013) considered interviews as a means of revealing emotional aspects of social practices. However, the asymmetrical power relations between interviewer and research participants may result in data obscurity (Anyan, 2013). Yin (2014) argued that one of the weaknesses of interview sessions is the reflexivity of research participants in providing bias answers. Therefore, I considered all available maneuvering options to increase my abilities in controlling the power imbalances and avoid asking leading questions.

Concerning the secondary sources of data collection in my doctoral study, I looked over the company's annual reports and website contents. Yin (2014) argued that researchers could review documents as many times as required due to the stability of such resources. In addition, documentation included a wide range of data in the course of a long span of time. However, there might be some difficulties in accessing all the reports and archival documents (Yin, 2014). Also, there is always the chance of receiving biased documents due to the unwillingness of data owners to share the entire sets of documents. Therefore, building a respectful and trustworthy relationship with participants may increase the chance of access to a broader range of data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) indicated that a mutual honesty and respect between researcher and participants might increase the chance of receiving more unbiased and trusted responses.

Researchers should develop their interview techniques and plan carefully to conduct a successful interview (Doody & Noonan, 2013). According to Yin (2014), asking open-ended questions gives the participants the opportunity to share their experiences with a high degree of freedom. Therefore, I asked open-ended questions during my semistructured interviews (see Appendix A) to allow my participants to express their views on the study topics. During the interviewing sessions, I observed the participants' reactions, feelings, and physical expressions, and then transferred all notes to a Microsoft Excel document for further references. Besides, I audio recorded all the interviews on a digital recorder for future transcriptions.

In the modern world of research, researchers have a variety of options to select their interview venue, either for face-to-face interview sessions or for remote interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). The venue for conducting the interviews in my doctoral study was participants' private offices to provide more convenience for them in terms of time and accommodation. Moreover, being in participants' office gave me the chance to observe their working condition at firsthand. However, being in participants' office did not mean to receive facilities from their corresponding companies. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) argued researchers can use any data collection approach to enrich their studies. I allocated extra time for each interviewing session to compensate for any unintentional interruption. Prior to starting the interview, participants received a copy of their signed consent forms to have a quick recall of the study and the nature of the interviewing session. According to the consent form, all participants have the right to halt the interview at any time without encountering any consequences.

Throughout the interview sessions, I employed my interview protocol (see Appendix A). Interview protocols not only enlist a set of interview questions but also show a procedural guideline for researchers to conduct a rational and meaningful process of data collection (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Researchers use interview protocols to have more control on their personal bias during the interview sessions (De Ceunynck et al., 2013). My interview protocol started with thanking participants for their participation and time dedication followed by a brief introductory about the research topic, which presented to the participants on the phone a day before the official interviewing session. The introduction included a review over the consent form and reminding participants' approval. Participants received the schedule for follow-up member checking process. Then I went through each interview question. During the interview session, I politely monitored any non-verbal gesture and asked follow up questions to acquire more in-depth insights. After finishing the interviews, I reminded participants that shortly they would receive my interpretation of their responses to each question via email as part of member checking process.

Companies' annual reports and website contents, which were publicly available, were the other sources of information in my doctoral study. Also, I reviewed the articles and websites related to the financial results of participants' companies to get more insights on their marketing activities and sales performance. Having more than one source of information is part of the triangulation technique to increase the credibility and reliability of the gathered information (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013; Wirtz, Pistoia, Ullrich, & Göttel, 2016). Researchers utilize triangulation techniques to add more insights to their works by using different sources of information (Choi, Cheung, & Pang, 2014; Hussein, 2015; Torrance, 2012). De Massis and Kotler (2014) discussed the role of triangulation of secondary sources in reducing researchers' bias. Furthermore, qualitative researchers use triangulation to address quality issue (Paradis et al., 2014). Therefore, to increase the validity of the findings of my doctoral study, I combined, compared, and contrasted different sources of data.

Researchers continue data collection process until they reach a point that participants do not add any novel information to the research topic, which means researcher achieves data saturation stage. Data saturation for each interview session occurs when a repetitive trend exists in responses and no additional information is to acquire (Morse et al., 2014). Data saturation is a way to ensure research findings are dependable (Anyan, 2013). Therefore, researchers utilize data saturation to enrich their studies through the data inquiry procedure (Morse, 2015). Lack of data saturation may negatively affect the analysis and results (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). To ensure the correctness and accuracy of the collected data, all participants received a copy of the interview interpretation as part of the member checking process. Providing interview transcripts and interpretation for participants' review is an essential part of the member checking process in qualitative studies (Houghton et al., 2013; Simpson & Quigley, 2016). Using member checking involves participants in a mutual process of clarifying the true meaning of discussed topics within the interviewing sessions (Reilly, 2013). Therefore, after data collection and data analysis phases of my doctoral study, I conducted member checking. For this reason, I provided each participant a copy of my interpretations of their corresponding responses to review and acknowledge the accuracy and correctness of my analysis. Subsequently, I compiled all feedbacks, comments, and corrections and reviewed the summaries with participants individually.

Data Organization Techniques

To increase the reliability of my doctoral study and allow future access to review the collected data and evidence, I kept the data in organized and well-documented database. My database contained all interview notes, audio records, transcripts, interpretations, companies' annular reports, online available archival files, and any other supporting documents gathered during the data collection phase. I used MS Excel and

Word to keep track of all files by giving them unique codes and reference numbers. Functions such as filtering and sorting in addition to the ability to generate pivot tables, make Excel a powerful tool to look at data from different perspectives (Kuhlmann & Ardichvili, 2015). Moreover, I used NVivo software alongside an Excel file to identify themes, keywords, trends, and patterns during the data organization procedure with corresponding details including dates. NVivo is one of the most common techniques in organization and analysis of textual data from interview sessions to endorse proper coding and recovery of data (Hilal & Alabri, 2013; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015). Researchers use NVivo software to extracts the right themes, generate categories, and visualize data in a variety of formats (Edwards-Jones, 2014; Ijaz, Malik, Nawaz Lodhi, Habiba, & Irfan, 2014; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). I also compared the results of NVivo software with the outcomes of the Excel file to increase the reliability of extracted themes.

To ensure data security and protection of data confidentiality, I stored my database on a password-protected hard drive, a Dropbox account, and a Cloud storage. Using a Cloud storage not only prevents unintentional loss of data (Burda & Teuteberg, 2013) but also provides a means of remote access to data for more convenience (Wang, Chow, Wang, Ren, & Lou, 2013). Using reliable means of data storage will increase the trust and satisfaction of participants (Burda & Teuteberg, 2014). All the hardcopies remain safe and secure within a digital password protected safe. I am the only person with exclusive access to the Dropbox and the digital safe. After 5 years from study completion, I will destroy all the collected data including the electronic versions and hard copies to ensure the protection of data confidentiality. I will use a shredder machine to shred any document in the form of hard copy.

Data Analysis Technique

To answer the research question on strategies that senior marketing managers of the international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the profitability of their firms, I used semistructured, open-ended interview question. Right after finishing the interview sessions, I summarized my understanding of each interview and forwarded my interpretation to participants for checking the accuracy and correctness. Also, I collected supplementary information through reviewing companies' annual reports and archival contents available on companies' websites. Using more than one source of data, known as triangulation, gives the researchers more comprehensive understanding of the response to the research question (Heale & Forbse, 2013; Hussein, 2015). Moreover, researchers utilize triangulation to increase the confidence and reliability of collected data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers use triangulation to decrease the risk of bias (De Massis & Kotler, 2014; Kothari, Hovanec, Sibbald, Donelle, & Trucker, 2015). Therefore, to improve the validity and dependability of the findings of my doctoral study and minimize the bias, I combined, compared, and contrasted different sources of data.

Analysis of transcripts, alongside with annual reports and available companies' website contents was the key phase in responding to the research question. In my doctoral research, I studied five different cases to get in-depth insights and find a holistic view of the phenomenon. After organizing the data in NVivo software and MS Excel file, I deepened my analysis by identifying the themes and ideas from the entire collected data. For this reason, I used automated pattern-based coding inside NVivo software, which is comprised of algorithms for coding the text passages with similar words to previously coded content. NVivo software is a practical tool for coding and clustering the large volume of texts (Woods et al., 2015; Yin, 2014; Zamawe, 2015). Researchers can use NVivo to organize their transcripts, extracts the right themes, generate categories, search throughout the data, and visualize data in different formats such as graphs, maps, and charts (Edwards-Jones, 2014). A commensurable and systematic process will ensure a successful data coding and consequently lead to extraction of meaningful themes (Cho & Lee, 2014; Claps, Svensson, & Aurum, 2015; Pierre & Jackson, 2014). I followed Rowley's (2012) steps for data analysis, which consisted of (a) make the data organized, (b) become familiar with data, (c) put data in nodes, (d) give data the proper codes, (e) interpret the data, and (f) present the data in a writing mode. Using NVivo facilitated my data organization process through identifying the word frequencies and performing keyword research throughout the text.

Data organization includes a compiling stage in which researchers put the whole collected data in a meaningful order to create an appropriate database, and disassembling stage in which researchers fragment the compiled data into themes and labels (Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014). Once I extracted the right themes and concepts from collected data and put them into proper clusters, I reassembled the categories into applicable sequences for further interpretation and conclusion. STP served as the conceptual framework for my doctoral study. Based on STP, marketing managers use different strategies to increase their competitiveness in the market by dividing the market into appropriate segments, targeting the right audiences, and positioning the products and services in the market (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Through careful analysis and review of all extracted themes, I explored the strategies that senior marketing managers of international oil and gas service companies used to enhance the profitability of their companies.

I compared and contrasted the findings with extant literature. In data analysis stage of the qualitative research in which interview is the primary source of data collection, researchers have the power to decide whether they want to share their interpretation and analysis with participants (Anyan, 2013). Researchers should also avoid hubris during the data analysis and interpretations (Cassidy, 2013). In my doctoral study, participants had a chance to review my interpretations and provide their corresponding feedbacks, corrections, and comments. Reviewing the researchers' interpretations is a part of the member checking process as a *best practice* in assuring the accuracy of qualitative research studies (Simpson & Quigley, 2016). Such practices will give more credibility to the findings by requesting participants' opinions about my understanding of their responses to the interview questions.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

This part of my doctoral study contains a description of my endeavors towards establishing reliability and validity throughout the doctoral study research. Reliability and validity are two key topics related to accuracy and precision of a research (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Street & Ward, 2012). In an empirical study, Kihn and Ihantola (2015) emphasized that validation of a study is an ongoing process in any methodological approach. Some researchers argued that the concepts of reliability and validity relate more precisely to the quantitative methodologies rather than qualitative methods (Foley & O'Conner, 2013; Kadioğlu, Şişman, & Ergün, 2012). In qualitative studies, researchers use trustworthiness and rigor to ensure reliability (Titze, Schenck, Logoz, & Lehmkuhl, 2014). I considered the four criteria that Houghton et al. (2013) defined for assessing the rigor of any qualitative study including: (a) dependability, (b) credibility, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability. Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, and Pearson (2014) argued that concepts of reliability and internal validity in a quantitative study bear the same meaning of dependability and credibility in qualitative research studies. To address the reliability of my doctoral study, I used member checking by asking participants to review my interpretations of their responses to interview questions.

Dependability. In a broad concept of research studies, reliability means assuring the consistency and repeatability of the results (Donatelli & Lee, 2013; Wahyani, 2012; Yin, 2014). Therefore, reliability ensures that different researchers, or the same researcher, will come up with the same results under the same conditions, either at the same time or in a different time. Part of reliability entails describing participants' experiences in a truthful and fair manner (Moloney, Hall, & Doody, 2012). Researchers ensure dependability of their work through an explanation of the research design, data gathering process, and instruments they are going to use through data collection (Wahyuni, 2012). To ascertain the reliability of my research, I followed the procedure proposed by Yin (2014), which includes: (a) having a detail plan for documenting research process and guidelines, (b) creating a database for case studies, (c) using member checking to ensure accuracy and correctness of takeaways from interview sessions. A logical, clear, and traceable documentation process will establish the dependability of the research (Cope, 2014; Munn et al., 2014). Preparing a stepwise and systematic procedure for my research design, participant's selection, data collection, data organization, and data analysis allow other researchers and investigators to repeat my study and confirm the quality of the research findings.

The purpose of having a comprehensive case study database is to increase the reliability of the study (Grossoehme, 2014; Yin, 2014). Therefore, I documented all my case studies in an inclusive database to allow the access to the entire collected documents including transcripts, notes, archival files, and other evidence and results directly. To ensure the dependability, correctness, and accuracy of my understanding of participants' experiences throughout the interview sessions, I used member checking process. Reilly (2013) and Zohrabi (2013) argued that using member checking involves participants in a mutual process of clarifying the true meaning of discussed topics within the interviewing sessions. Moreover, researchers use member checking to ensure data saturation and increase the reliability and credibility of the research (Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2013). I conducted member checking after finishing the interview sessions. For this reason, all participants received a copy of my one-length paragraph interpretation of their responses to each interview question for further review, possible corrective actions, and comment.

Validity

Validity reflexes the level legitimacy and correctness of a research through measuring the rigor and credibility of the findings (Srivastava & Misra, 2014). Validity constitutes the quality of the research procedure and results via analysis of findings to ensure the outcomes of the study reflect the primary purpose of the research (Aravamudhan & Krishnaveni, 2015; Rao, 2013). In a qualitative study, validity is a crucial metric to confirm a credible, trustworthy, and plausible data generation (Venkatesh et al., 2013). To report on validity in my doctoral study, I elaborated on credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation.

Credibility. Validity of the study indicates the degree to which the evidence support the correctness of the data interpretations. Data validity assures an agreement among study procedures, data analysis, results, final discussions, and conclusions through credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation (Houghton et al., 2013). Credibility is a function of qualitative research studies (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012).

Researchers should assure a logical connection stands between the original data sources and researchers' interpretations (Munn et al., 2014). According to Houghton et al. (2013), in qualitative case studies, researchers adherence to certain protocols and guidelines to define the credibility of the research. As the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study, I prepared and developed appropriate protocols and procedures applicable to different stages of my doctoral study from study design to data collection, organization, analysis, and interpretation. Through member checking process, participants reviewed my interview interpretations and advised for any probable change to correction. Kornbluh (2015) discussed that using member checking technique, researchers solicit participants' insights to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings. Trustworthiness shows the degree of confidence over the results of research (El Hussein, Jakubec, & Osuji, 2015). Therefore, I assured all participants take part in member checking process after data collection and data analysis phases.

Yin (2014) discussed three mechanisms to ensure the validity of the study including: (a) triangulation, (b) data saturation, and (c) identification of study limitation. Torrance (2012) argued that having more than one source of data in a qualitative study will increase the validity of the research process and promotes the results. The process of having more than one sources of information is part of triangulation technique that raises the credibility and reliability of the gathered information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Triangulation, alongside with member checking, use of peer debriefing, and providing thick descriptions, is a strategy to enhance the trustworthiness of a research (Anney, 2014). Therefore, to increase the validity my doctoral study findings, I combined, compared, and contrasted different sources of data including in-depth interview sessions, companies' annual reports, and publicly available archival contents on companies' websites.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which researchers can transfer or generalize the results of a study to other contexts or situations (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Houghton et al., 2013; Thomas, & Magilvy, 2011). Franco et al. (2015) associated tying study results to existing research with transferability and trustworthiness. I presented the findings of my doctoral study in a systematic and detailed presentation in which there are indirect and rich quotes from participants. Moreover, I provided a description of my sample size and population to allow other investigators to compare and contrast my findings with other demographic samples. The degree to which a study is congruent with participants' previous experiences will influence the level of transferability of the study (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013). In Addition to following data collection and analysis techniques through interview protocols, I described participants demographics in order to provide a basis reference for future researchers and ensure study transferability.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the state of accuracy and neutral characteristics of the data in a research (Houghton et al., 2013). Also, confirmability entails keeping a systematic record of all data sources, analysis procedures, and sample characteristics (El Hussein et al., 2015). Therefore, confirmability is similar to dependability in a sense that researchers strive to establish the accuracy and consistency of data through member checking and triangulation. I examined the frequency of themes via NVivo software to scrutinize the accuracy of the analysis and enhance the confirmability of the study.

Data Saturation. I continued data collection until reaching the point that participants did not add any new information to the research topic. At a point that there is a repetitive trend in participants' responses and no additional information exists to acquire, researchers achieve data saturation (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013; Morse et al., 2014). Data saturation is a way to ensure research findings are dependable (Anyan, 2013). Therefore, researchers utilize data saturation to enrich their studies through the data inquiry procedure (Morse, 2015). More sample size does not necessarily mean a richer population (Marshall et al., 2013); however, having the adequate number of samples is crucial for any successful study (Ward, Vaughn, Burney, & Ostbye, 2016), as long as researchers can ensure the data saturation. Five cases seemed to be a proper size for collecting the data; however, I was ready to continue adding more participant in case I could not reach the data saturation stage in which no novel information emerges from initial five data collection sources. In addition, I used follow-up member checking process to ensure obtaining in-depth and accurate data, and reaching data saturation. Simpson and Quigley (2016) argued that providing interview interpretations for participants' review is an essential part of the member checking process in qualitative studies.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover marketing strategies that senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies used to enhance the profitability of their organizations, particularly during the recession periods. I used a well-developed qualitative multiple case study to conduct the research. In section 2, I restated the purpose of the study followed by a detailed description of the role of the researcher; identification of the participants, population, and sampling method; and elaboration on the data collection tools, data organization, and data analysis process. Section 2 concluded with an overview of the research reliability and validity. In section 3, I present the findings of the study followed by the application to professional practice, implementation for social change, and recommendations for action. I conclude with providing a clear and concise review of the conclusion of the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 3, I outline the findings of the research and the social and economic influences of the study. I will present the outcomes of the study in different themes extracted from the interview sessions, companies' annual reports, and companies' website contents. Section 3 includes (a) an introduction to the study, (b) presentation of findings, (c) application to professional practice, (d) implications for social change, (e) recommendations for action, (f) recommendations for further research, (g) reflections, and (h) conclusion.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that senior marketing managers of ISCOGI in the Middle East use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. I conducted five semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The participants were senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies located in the Middle East. I used data triangulation by reviewing and contrasting data available on companies' websites and annual reports. The outputs of the interview sessions and secondary sources of information answered the following research question: What strategies do senior marketing managers of ISCOGI use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during declining oil price periods?

After transcribing the five interviews and collecting, comparing, and contrasting the data with companies' annual reports and public website contents, I used NVivo 10 to import textual data for a qualitative analysis and coding the data. Data analysis revealed five themes regarding marketing strategies including (a) customers, (b) relationship marketing, (c) differentiation, (d), services (e), and (f) price. The extent of the similarities among participants' responses to the interview questions and the level of achievements represented in annual reports of the corresponding companies supported my findings.

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that senior marketing managers of ISCOGI in the Middle East use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. The central research question was: What strategies do senior marketing managers of ISCOGI use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during declining oil price periods? I conducted semistructured interviews with five senior marketing managers of international oilfield service companies and reviewed data from companies' annual reports and website contents to triangulate the primary information. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes, except the last interview, which lasted 75 minutes because of P5's desire to continue the session and provide further info. I extracted the largest portion of my data from the interview sessions. Interview is one of the most effective techniques for data collection in qualitative studies (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Morse & McEovy, 2014; Wang & Zhu, 2015). After each session, I transcribed the audio recordings by listening to the audio records. Each transcribing process took between 5 and 7 hours because of the relatively high volume of content and repetition.

I tried to reduce the bias using series of actions including the integration of the study findings with recent and peer-reviewed literature, use of member checking technique, and validating the interview data by engaging additional sources of information. Data saturation was achieved when there was no emerging data or additional information. After reviewing the transcripts of the forth interview, I reached data saturation and the fifth interview session just confirmed the state of data saturation without adding any novel information. Heslehurst et al. (2013) argued that researchers reach data saturation when no new information is coming out of the interview sessions. I assigned a unique alphanumeric code to each participant and his or her corresponding company. For example, P1 and C1 represent Participant 1 and Company 1, respectively. Analysis of participants' responses to interview questions and evaluation of the companies' annual reports and the website contents of the corresponding companies led to extraction of the following themes:

1. Customer.
2. Relationship marketing.
3. Differentiation.
4. Service.
5. Price/revenue.

I sent my interpretation of participants' responses to each corresponding participant for the sake of member checking to review and comment on the accuracy, correctness, and rightness of the document. I provided all participants the final version of the analysis for the record. Member checking is a technique that researchers use to ensure data saturation and increase the credibility of the research (Houghton et al., 2013; Koelsch, 2013; Marshall et al., 2013). Using member checking increases the researchers' confidence in the collected data (Simpson & Quigley, 2016). Using the NVivo software and a customized Excel file, I extracted the main themes and keywords that participants used frequently during the interviews. Although participants were from different companies, as soon as I started data collection for the second case, I noticed the emergence of common keywords. Table 1 indicates the most frequent keywords and the frequency of the usage. As shown in Table 1, the most frequent keyword was *customer/client*, followed by *relationship* and *differentiation*.

After a thorough review of interview transcripts, I noticed participants used the word *customer* or *client* to identify and address a particular segment of the market, as either a new segment or part of an existing market segment. In addition, participants frequently employed the word *relationship* to emphasize *targeting* specific clients. Furthermore, participants stated in several cases the importance of differentiation by *positioning* the products and services in dynamic marketplaces. All these keywords are among the main constructs of the STP conceptual model, which I used as the foundation lens for my doctoral research. Smith (1956) identified the following key constructs for the STP model: (a) market segmentation, which represents clustering the existing and potential customers based on their common attributes; (b) market targeting, which discusses the process of focusing marketing strategies on a particular group; and (c) market positioning, which describes how to locate the products and services in customers' minds against competitors.

Table 1

Keywords Frequency

Keyword	Count
Customers/client (Segmentation)	145
Relationship (Targeting)	98
Differentiation (Positioning)	85
Service	120
Price	67
Revenue	35

Theme 1: Customers/Clients (Market Segmentation)

The first and the most frequent theme was the customer as a central feature in the oil and gas industry. All participants emphasized the important and critical role of customers in business-to-business marketing, particularly in periods of declining oil prices. Customers are the key elements for market segmentation strategies. P1 stated that once the oil price is down, the spending budget of the clients would reduce dramatically, affecting all the service companies involved in clients' projects. Clients try to lower the cost as much as possible; therefore, customers force the service providers, suppliers, and other stakeholders to become in line with such cost control procedures. Per P2, during the oil price downturn, the customers become more powerful in comparison with periods of higher oil price. P3 and P4 stressed the change in customers' negotiating power during the market downturns. Michael (2014) argued that market distortion, because of imbalance power of the producers and consumers, has altered the market equilibrium and brought uncertainties in the supply section comparing to the prediction of the demand part.

The clients in the oil and gas industry are divided into two major groups of national oil companies (NOCs) and international oil companies (IOCs). According to all participants, the behavior of each group of clients is different from the other group. P1 stated NOCs have more financial resources that can be of significant advantage during the oil price decline. P2 and P3 reiterated the advantageous conditions of NOCs in terms of financial budgets; however, P3 stated NOCs have their own limitations owing to the NOCs legal commitments to the governments. P3 indicated NOCs are generally responsible for providing and supporting a considerable portion of the government budgets in their corresponding countries. P4 and P5 considered NOCs to be the trap zone for oilfield service companies in a sense that NOCs managers are generally from the government side, or at least connected to the government body, with the attitude of overweighing the national interests over global business trends. P4 argued NOCs might express their willingness to invest in oil and gas projects during the oil price downturn;

however, NOCs commitment to the government would probably diminish any desire for business development in such economic conditions.

On the other hand, the IOCs have tight budgets with huge commitments to the shareholders. All participants agreed on the wider range of markets that IOCs are engaged and the chance of IOCs for distributing the business portfolios across a variety of fields. However, according to P1, the nature of this group of customers dictates more strict decisions in times of oil price downturn. Comparing to the customers, regardless of being national or international, oilfield service companies seem to be more sensitive to the market volatility in comparison to the production and exploration companies (Michael, 2016). Supply of the oil and gas, in turn, affects the companies' strategies for introducing new projects and expanding ongoing developments. A proper market segmentation will positively affect both market performance and salespeople's performance (Terho et al., 2015).

Drop of the oil price has had a significant effect on the market players. P1, P2, and P5 posited disruption in the oil and gas industry had emerged new entrants into the market in all local, regional, and international scales. P3 stated during the downturn, some new players emerge that previously did not have enough resources to compete in the market. P2 stressed new entrants are in both customer and service provider sectors. According to P2, the emergence of the low-quality customers leads to the rise of low quality service companies. P1 and P4 argued because of the low expectations of some of the newly emerged customers, the low quality oilfield service companies will have a chance to increase their activities and consequently grow their market share. P1 reiterated managers of the decent international oilfield service companies would not sacrifice the quality and reputation of their corresponding companies for the sake of higher market share or greater revenue; therefore, will face some challenging circumstances. P3 opined there are also high-tech, small-size firms that use the market downturn and provide specific services or products to solve client's issues. Such small firms have much lower operational costs compared to multinational corporates and have a great chance to grow their businesses. Schlager and Maas (2013) discussed the need for having a case-by-case analysis to identify and evaluate the market emerging players and take the proper action in segmenting the market.

All participants agreed the main reason some of the customers, either new or existing, tend to cooperate with lower quality service companies is changing priorities. All participants indicated tight budgets force customers to reduce costs by any available means including but not limited to releasing some employees, postponing new investments, retendering the existing projects, and switching the service providers. In such challenging situations, P1 believed if quality and safety were not a priority for a customer, the customer would select service providers with lower quality products and services to save more dollars. P1, P3, P4, and P5 emphasized on the correlation between customers cutting budget plans and service companies strategies. Cuadros and Domínguez (2014) argued marketers should reassess the marketing strategies based on changes in customers' lifetime values. P2 stated the industry downturn causes new emerging segments among customers that requires marketers to evaluate customers' reactions to the market.

All participants consented on the role of senior marketing managers in identification and establishment of specific marketing strategies during the periods of declining oil price to match the novel situations and needs of the customers. P2 emphasized the role of the senior marketing managers in developing marketing strategies to meet short-term and long-term requirements of the challenging markets during the oil price downturn. P2 stated since the approach of the customers towards existing and future projects would change, because of the new market conditions, senior marketing managers should be careful in promoting strategies that might become a new norm in the future. P4 confirmed senior marketing managers should carefully tailor any marketing decision during the oil price downturn to avoid creation of unmanageable demands for customers, especially during the recovery and booming periods.

The presence of new market players should not expel the existing service providers. P5 posited senior marketing managers of the ISCOGI should adjust marketing strategies in a more diverse manner. P5 simulated the role of the senior marketing managers to building a diverse portfolio across a variety of the stock markets. According to P5, only open-minded and visionary marketers can retrain existing customers and attract new ones during such challenging periods by monitoring the customers' trends in reassessing priorities and adopting changes accordingly. P2 and P3 reiterated the necessity for having a diverse marketing strategy. P4 indicated senior marketing managers should review the marketing strategies every single week and put in place new marketing priorities based on clients' priorities. P4 believed any alternative product or services might shift the customers' long-run wants and needs. Therefore, sales and marketing intelligence should stay alert to discover any opportunity that might be negligible during normal market conditions. Neglecting the hidden institutional heterogeneity of the market may cause significant problems for companies in building market segmentation (Schlager & Maas, 2013).

P1 revealed the customers' approach in cutting the budget means fewer projects would be introduced to the market. Therefore, market will become more challenging and competitive for existing service companies. P3 stated the necessity for reducing employees in all fields including the sales and marketing functions. The other participants took a completely different approach in this regard and stressed the importance of sales and marketing forces during the downturn periods. P1 emphasized the need for recruitment of highly skilled and experienced marketing forces that can understand customers' ever-growing demands. P2 reiterated the essential role of sales and marketing people to be visible and present in clients' office, almost all the time. P2 and P5 said their corresponding companies had taken advantage of existing pool of recently released employees and had recruited some of them for the technical marketing and sales position.

One of the main classification parameters in segmenting a market is geographic locations. Since the focus of the study was on Middle East, participants did not discuss the marketing strategies based on geographical changes; however, all participants reported some differences in market segmentation according to the specific geographical needs. For example, in areas in which the major clients were operating in offshore environments or tight shale reservoirs, the effect of the oil price decline has been more severe comparing to the conventional and land operators. All participants acknowledged having divers operations and customers across variety of oil prone countries would imply a safety margin while facing dramatic market changes in one location. In particular, P2 exemplified how key clients in Middle East survived the initial wave of oil price downturn while their counterparts in U.S. land were struggling with low oil prices. As a result, P2's company started to reassess the market segments in United States few months prior to doing the same in the Middle East area. In addition to geographic factors, cultural and econometric parameters may also influence the clients' behavior to the market changes and consequently requires additional attention from marketers' side. Budeva and Mullen (2014) suggested to marketers to review the economic and cultural variables together on a regular basis to have a comprehensive conclusion on their marketing strategies through international market segmentations.

Theme 2: Relationship (Market Targeting)

The second emerging theme was relationship. All participants emphasized the importance of maintaining and leveraging a close and intimate relationship with customers. Relationship marketing has considerable application in promoting businesses and increasing the profitability (Borisavljevic, 2013). P1 stated clients should feel the presence of service providers in times of business downturn. P3 and P4 reiterated that during the periods of oil price downturn, marketing and sales people should prove the significance of their relationship to the customers. According to P5, customers should not feel left alone specially when they are in shortage of solutions and ideas. P5 opined customer relationship dictates the survival of the business during the downturn periods. According to P5, if customers believe in the trustworthiness of a relationship, they will maintain the connection and involve the service provider in their market reassessing plans.

Although maintaining an intimate yet professional relationship with customers is not limited to the oil price downturn periods, according to P1, during such periods a close contact with clients has additional advantages. P1 stated customers would more acknowledge a friend than a sales person trying to sell up services and products. Customers' gratitude and satisfaction, which comes from strategies beyond solely financial benefits, will enhance the long-term relationship (Fazal e Hasan, Mortimer, Lings, & Neale, 2017). P2 stated customers value support and presence of service companies during the downturn periods. Building a strong and reliable relationship marketing will give edge over competitors during the recovery periods and implementation of long-term marketing strategies (Gharehbashloni & Seify, 2014). P2 restated that her company's approach in creating communication networks and trustable relationship with customers during the 2008 market recession had facilitated her marketing team in execution of the marketing strategies afterward. The fundamental rule of relationship marketing is trust, commitment, and gratitude (Mishra, 2016). P3 and P4 emphasized the significance of having a trustworthy relationship with clients at all time.

When participants discussed the importance of relationship with customers, they all went beyond the regular usage of channels such as CRM. P1 said during the oil price downturn, clients are under a huge pressure to employ services and products with minimum operational and executional costs; therefore, parameters such as customer loyalty and brand value might be overshadowed by financial restraints. According to P1, in financial downturn conditions, if senior marketing manager had already built a relationship with his or her counterparts in the client office, the chance of staying in the business loop would remain high. P2 opined marketing managers of oilfield service companies should use strategies that engage and share service company's benefits and losses with clients. Sheth (2017) argued in today's challenging market places, relationship marketing should shift towards virtual joint ventures between customers and product/service providers. P4 also indicated the necessity of being engaged with customers as a partner rather than a merely service provider. P5 stated CRM is vital for capturing the opportunities, managing the relationships, and working on loyalties; however, relationship marketing is more than that.

According to P5, relationship marketing requires breaking some barriers, entering into the safe zone of the customers, and being considered as an extra source of cost reduction. A thorough involvement with clients in daily activities will elevate the relationship to the next level of contribution and collaboration in which both client and service company will benefit. The direction of relationship marketing is towards pushing limits and moving towards deeper involvement of all parties (Gummerus, Koskull, & Kowalkowski, 2017). P3 believed as the trust and reliance between customers and service companies grow, the marketing managers will have an easier task to empower the relationship and become a dependable and consistent foundation of solution.

Initiating a relationship is not always an easy task and marketers may encounter some oppositions. Both P2 and P3 emphasized the resistance of some buying centers in some of the customers' offices when service providers attempt to initiate a closer relationship. According to P2, some clients may consider an attempt to leverage a relationship as an effort to take advantage of market situations. P3 said some customers do not like to see service companies being involved in A to Z of the activities, though client might be in extreme need of assistance in terms of both hardware and software. According to P3, part of such incorrect conception is due to privacy policies but a larger portion of the concern comes from lack of trust. P3 considered two separate approaches to resolve this challenge: (a) building the relationship in a gradual manner over time to increase the confidence and avoid instant shocks, and (b) approaching different buying centers in the client office via different channels. Sheth (2013) indicated marketers should go beyond economic benefits and transcend the relationship to a friendship seeking for a long-term affiliation.

All the participants indicated their corresponding service companies have a dedicated budget for marketing and a well-established marketing plan exists for both short-run and long run missions. However, P1 and P3 gave more weight on relationship rather than the influence of the marketing plans. P1 stated the necessity for having a marketing roadmap in the form of a marketing plan to ensure all parts of the company are moving in the right direction and will aim to increase the revenue and profitability. Nevertheless, both P1 and P2 reiterated personal selling plays a significant role in the oil and gas industry. P4 said technical sales people with a solid background on a specific service or product are the front line of promoting service companies' products in the oilfield industry. According to P4 the relationship of the sales people during the downturn periods can determine whether a sell would happen or not. Although all the participants emphasized on the importance of having an established marketing plan, only P5 highlighted that without having an integrated marketing strategy there would be no successful selling in the mid and long term.

P5 stated oil companies, either NOCs or IOCs, would build their long-term relationship based on the sales reputation of the service providers as well as the perception about the abilities of the service provider in fulfilling the assigned tasks. P5 restated building such a long-term reputation is only possible through having an integrated marketing plan from advertising to direct marketing, sales promotions, public relationship, and attention to clients' market visions. According to P5, using CRM system is a well-recognized approach to manage the relationship with customers and track the sales tasks and lead the opportunities; however, CRM will just assist in documenting sales information while the main task happens in the client's office where the marketing and/or sales people create a trustworthy connection with the customer. P1 said honesty and decent personality have the same value as expertise in the oil and gas relationship marketing. P2 opined relationship with customers should be nourished and renewed from time to time. According to P2, considering the dynamics of the oil and gas industry and the need for innovative products and services, having a cherished relationship with customers would facilitate the acceptance and approval of the novel products or services.

Although all the participants gave a high mark to personal sales and friendly relationship with clients, P2 indicated for a long-term business growth, marketing managers should consider all the marketing channels as an integrated strategy. P2 restated using social media and getting into the customers' circle of friendship is a useful strategy and paves the way of getting closer to the customers. P3 and P4 also shared same experiences of being actively involved with clients using the social media. In fact, although none of the participants' corresponding companies was active on the social media, almost all of the participants had practiced social media in a way or another to strengthen the relationship with clients and use that relationship for promoting the professional connections. The ever-growing influence of the digital marketing in everyday business transactions requires a novel view over official trainings of marketers (Atwong, 2015). However, P5 showed some careful forethought in using social media for building a friendly relationship with customers. P5 stated unofficial channels might act as a double-edged sword that can harm the professional relationships if marketers do trespass the red lines. Red lines, according to P5, vary based on personality and demographics, and require customization on a case-by-case basis. Having such marketing skills might require official trainings in social media marketing as proposed by Atwong (2015).

The nature of the oil and gas industry and the way the companies deal with each other might impose some significant challenges in utilizing social media for creating a strong relationship marketing with customers. P1 stated although social media might not directly influence the relationship with customers, the use of social media might enhance the intimacy and friendship. Overall, an integrated relationship marketing is a facilitator to increase profitability and building a stronger brand awareness (Hajipour, Bavarsad, & Zarei, 2013). Relationship marketing will enhance the firms' profitability and increase the revenues (Borisavljevic, 2013). Therefore, marketers and salespeople should use all the available channels to develop a trustworthy, committed, reliable, and consistent relationship with customers, regardless of the market situations.

Theme 3: Differentiation (Market Positioning)

The third emerging theme was differentiation, both in services and in products. Changes in customers' values means marketers should reassess the strategies based on new customer values and differentiate the products and services against competition (Cuadros & Domínguez, 2014). Differentiation strategies not only leverage the company's profitability but also increase the brand awareness in the market (Yang & Chie, 2014). P2 believed differentiation without attraction is not going to be fruitful. P2 restated the need for innovative and novel services and products that can raise the customers' appetite and encourage clients to try the new services. Sarathy and Banalieva (2014) argued marketers should address the customers' needs in an innovative manner to get some marketing advantages over competitors. P3 stated differentiation should be in line with value creation, and consequently, should attract customers' attention to innovative values and solutions. Generating unique characteristics for company's products and services should be an integral part of differentiation strategies (Torre, Fenger, VanTwist, & Bressers, 2014).

To achieve differentiation, senior marketing managers of service companies require working with departments of research and development (R&D). P1 emphasized the importance of investment on research projects to come up with state-of-the-art and quality products than can differentiate pioneers from other competitors. Klaus and Maklan (2013) indicated companies' managers attempt to provide a unique and satisfactory experience for customers, weighing more on personal experiences than advertised quality factors. Trif (2013) identified customer satisfaction as a main force that will lead to brand loyalty and increase long-term profitability. Each client uses the personal experiences with products and services as an evaluating parameter and differentiating factor (Bagdare & Jain, 2013). According to P1, senior marketing managers can act as the primary link between customers' requirements and R&D departments to provide the best feed for future innovation and development projects.

In a challenging and price-sensitive marketplace, the level of differentiation may vary significantly from one client to another. P4 posited marketers should research the market thoroughly to understand which tier is willing to pay the extra dollar for a premium product. A certain product may receive different welcomes from different customers in dissimilar buying sectors (Cuellar & Brunamonti, 2014). The investment on R&D projects must be target oriented and well studied prior to introducing the products to the market. The need for differentiation has forced marketers to become market oriented and requires continuous update of strategies based on market changes (Nalcaci & Yagci, 2014). P5 stated differentiation is not all about innovation, but renewing the delivery packages and adding extra answer products to the previous packages will assist in differentiating one service company from another. P1 shared his experience in differentiating the products of the company through a marketing campaign in which the service company offered free transportation of equipment and by-products required to fulfill the operations. P1's experience of a simple differentiating offer, with some extra cost for the service company, had led to more activities and additional revenue. P1 argued the offer not only differentiated his company from the competitors, but also strengthened the relationship between the service company and one of the major clients.

Marketing managers can differentiate the products and services from competitors by investing in marketing innovation (Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016). P1 said although innovation in developing new products and services will bring more opportunities and will differentiate service providers, the nature of the oil and gas industry does not allow a full usage of Internet-based technologies such as social media to be utilized in the same way marketers in other industries do. P1 argued managers in the oil and gas industry use social media mainly to reach public audiences during the emergency events and post-crisis activities. P3, P4, and P5 reiterated the same concept; however, all believed in future advances of social media within the oil and gas industry. Therefore, in the oil and gas industry, using social media to differentiate a service company from competitors seems to be a challenging task. P2 agreed corporate social responsibility (CSR) will eventually forces service companies to be more proactive on social media and such activities will act as a differentiation factor. Manning (2013) argued as long as company's social responsibility activities are align with company's mission, managers will be able to use CSR to increase the market share and attract more customers through differentiation. Nevertheless, all participant presumed in the future the use of Internet-based technology would become more applicable and would make more common sense in the oil and gas upstream.

P4 and P5 considered differentiation as a positive move for the whole industry that may bring competitive advantages. P4 believed determined and energetic marketing campaigns would leverage the total effort of the service companies in developing novel technologies that can improve the whole oil industry. A thorough differentiation will improve the positioning of the products in customers' minds (Maarit Jalkala & Keränen, 2014). An aggressive marketing can potentially improve the companies' capabilities in providing better quality products and services that can satisfy both side of the supply and demand chain (Sarathy & Banalieva, 2014). P5 restated that differentiation strategies would escalate the positive competition in the market and lead in to higher quality services. Cheng (2014) discussed an increase in differentiation capabilities of the companies might result in elimination of some competitors due to lack of sufficient quality products. Nevertheless, differentiation is not always possible in all market categories. P5 reiterated the need for a wise and on time decision to move from one category to another, if differentiation is not possible in a particular class. According to P5, the mission of the service company and high-level marketing strategies will dictate whether competing in all fronts has value for the company or not.

One way of differentiating a company from others is through branding. Product differentiation can influence the brand equity and pricing strategies (Davcik & Sharma, 2015). A unique and hard-to-replace brand is a distinctive feature that customers use to differentiate available products in the market (Alstete, 2014). All participants admitted the necessity to create, develop, and establish a unique brand that can addresses both company's sustainable missions and customers' pride. The name of the brand will also affect the positioning of the product in customer's mind (Kachersky & Carnevale, 2015). One of the criteria for customers to distinguish amongst competitors in the market is the brand strength and visibility (Reichart Smit & Sanderson, 2015). P1 and P2 stated brand recognition and reputation is a major differentiator in the oil and gas market and can give significant advantages over competition. Kaur, Sharma, Kaur, and Sharma (2015) argued a strong brand name provides a considerable differentiating mindset for the customers that may positively influence the customer loyalty. Altuntaş, Semerciöz, Mert, and

Pehlivan (2014) found a strong relationship between brand image and successful differentiation strategies.

P2 posited although variations in novel tools and equipment in addition to specialized resources is a differentiator in any challenging market, the pace of progress is unequal among competition. P2 stated many senior marketing managers of oilfield service companies are aware of differentiation benefits but only few have the resources, budgets, and flexibility to risk new ideas for proposing new products and services. Therefore, there is a visible variation in products' quality and quantity in different marketplaces, which allows marketing pioneers to take advantage of the specific manufacturing power of their associate companies and make a significant gap with competitors. P4 and P5 emphasized the importance of differentiating the products regardless of the market booming or slump conditions. According to P4 and P5, the challenges oil and gas companies have been facing in recent years have provided a great chance for service companies to discern and differentiate their capabilities from competitors through unique products and customized services.

Theme 4: Service(s)

The fourth emerging theme was the services that oilfield service companies offered to their customers in terms of variety, quality, quantity, and innovativeness. Except P3, all other participants believed oilfield service companies are centric in directing and leading the customers towards novel services and products. P3 indicated customers are the dominant voice in the oil and gas industry and oilfield service companies just follow the customer's leads even in solution-base projects. P3 believed customers will identify what services or products should be developed to answer the ever-growing operational challenges. However, P1 and P2 reckoned customers only raise the issue and it is up to service providers to come up with the best service or product that can address clients' issues. P4 stated oilfield service companies that have research and development (R&D) department are well ahead of competition due to the ability of inventing products that not only resolve the client's problems, but also save time and cost. In P4's opinion, R&D should remain up and running during the market downturns for two main reasons: (a) development of innovative and state-of-the-art products that can specifically address clients' concerns with lowest possible cost, and (b) prediction of future market needs. P5 reiterated the need for innovative services that are tailored particularly for explicit operations. Aroean and Michaelidou (2014) argued marketing managers should pay extra attention to innovations to leverage the market positioning and upgrade the marketing segmentation through targeting the cognitive and emotional customers.

One of the major approaches P3's corresponding company has taken during the oil price downturn has been providing solutions to the clients rather than merely offering a service or a particular product. P3 stated customers are in need of whole package solutions more than any time. According to P3, one of the main marketing strategies he and his marketing team have taken since 2014 has been making sure sales and marketing representatives visit clients' offices every day. Therefore, he was aware of all client's requirements and tried to provide solutions for those needs. P2 and P4 emphasized the need for preparation of a solution-based package during economic depressions to assist customers through shouldering some of the market burdens. P2 reiterated clients, in general, and high profile clients, in particular, welcome any solution-base offer that can reduce costs and increase productivity. For the same reason, P2's associated company has made couple of joint ventures with smaller companies to fortify its capabilities in offering competitive solution-base packages.

P1 posited offering different packages with different prices is one of the best ways to support customers during the oil price downturn. P1 stated each package would contain several offerings with different quantity and quality of products and services allowing customers to choose the most suitable packages. Safari and Thilenius (2013) argued discounted packages based on quantity of sales would encourage consumers to consider more purchases constructed upon the allocated budget. P2 said her company offers same quality products with lower prices during the market downturn based on clients' type and buying power. Such achievement, according to P2, is because of strict cost reduction policies. P4 considered variation in offerings would increase customers' purchase abilities and escalate the chance of business transaction during market restrictions.

One of the difficulties with new products and services is lack of sufficient knowledge from clients' side to understand the functionality and applicability of the new tools and services. P1 identified two major approaches to abovementioned barrier. First, service developers should provide intensive trainings for all involved customers to educate them on pros and cons of each new product and services. Second, all new tools, software, solution packages, and product updates should be advertised thoroughly. While P2, P4, and P5 had similar notions on advertising the new products, P3 had a contradictory vision about advertising. According to P3, advertises will just impose additional costs to the company's financial challenges and the return of such investment would be negligible. Notwithstanding the controversial standpoints on advertises, all participants believed in the necessity of conducting seminars and workshops for different customers to keep them tuned and informed of any changes on the product and service fleets.

Differentiation, as defined by Smith (1956), is a way of converging market demands towards particular products and services. Therefore, adding new equipment and tools to the existing fleet is a wise way of managing clients' demands. P2 exemplified in 2015 her company transferred lots of high-tech tools from low activity locations such as North America to the Middle East, where the activity was still high. Some of these tools where previously marketed in the Middle East; however, because of the high service prices none of the clients had accepted to run the tools. Nevertheless the initial redundancy of oilfield service companies to reduce the price of the new-technology products, during the oil price downturn top managements agreed to waive the previous policies and lower the prices. As a result, the challenging market condition could become a win-win situation in which clients can run new technologies with lower prices and service companies will generate revenue by maintaining certain level of activities.

One of the strategies all participants used during the oil price downturn has been facilitation of transforming the low-cost strategies to the innovative-base tactics. Blending the cost cutting policies with strategies focusing on innovation and value-creation is a way of leveraging company's services and engaging interaction with customers through innovative products (Gehani, 2013). P1 stated investments on innovative products and services paid off well during the oil price decline through which innovative products led the market and were on all-time demand by clients. P2 and P4 shared similar experiences of getting more market share through use of innovative and unique equipment that could save considerable time and money for clients. Beuren and Oro (2014) confirmed the connection between innovation and product differentiation. P4 emphasized the role of senior marketing managers of the international service companies in leading the innovative initiations and convincing top management to invest in differentiating strategies.

Theme 5: Price/Revenue

The fifth theme that emerged from the interview sessions was price and revenue as two interconnected realities of the market. P1 used the term return of equity (ROE) to indicate the effect of the oil price on the profitability of the firms based on initial investment of shareholders. According to P1, the lower the oil price the smaller the profitability of the corporate, and consequently, the lesser the ROE. Therefore, marketing managers seek initiatives in marketing strategies to increase the chance of generating higher revenues. P1 believed the ultimate goal of any profitable business is to generate profit; therefore, all parts of a company should work in harmony to achieve the same goal. P2, P3, and P5 stated the first impression of lower service prices within their junior marketing colleagues was lower profits while in reality the service and product prices are not the main influential parameters on the revenue and profit. P2 reiterated revenue might rise if the company's leaders can manage to control the cost and somehow increase the activity. P2 restated marketing managers should educate all team members about the pros and cons of lower prices.

In several studies, researchers found different effects of oil price on the economics showing the importance of having a comprehensive view over the prices, market players, and economic consequences (Ghosh & Kanjilal, 2016; Kang, Ratti, & Yoon, 2015; Siddiqui & Seth, 2015; Zhu, Li, & Li, 2014). However, in some cases, the relationship between oil price and market drivers is not straightforward and requires a holistic research on socioeconomic and sociopolitical parameters (Lin, Fang, & Cheng, 2014; Liu, Ma, & Wang, 2015; Naifar & Al Dohaiman, 2013). In such a complex environment, marketing managers have a critical role in adjusting strategies with market changes to ensure the highest possible profitability. P5 explained how using a team of economic experts has leveraged his strategic marketing decisions during the oil price downturn. P5 stated two academic scholars were recruited in 2014 and 2015 to analyze the Middle Eastern clients with focus on the cost-cut policies. The results, according to P5, led to adopting marketing strategies in which the focus was to provide solution-based offers to not only resolve the technical issues but also reduce the cost of handling the projects. P2 also emphasized on using holistic look at economic effects of oil price.

Prices are variable factors marketers play with during different market circumstances to adjust the products and services based on market attraction (Narangajavana, Garrigos-Simon, García, & Forgas-Coll, 2014). One of the main parameters that affect any business sustainability and growth is pricing (Iveroth, et al., 2013). Direct and indirect costs are two main factors identifying the price of a product or service (Hassan, Yaacob, & Abdullatiff, 2014). P3 stated although price is a differentiator factor, companies may suffer severely from the unfair pricings competitions. P3 reiterated the need for restrict regulatory inspection to monitor the market competition and avoid any unfair rivalry. P4 confirmed the same notion and stated that lower purchasing power may encourage customers to weigh more on price rather than quality. However, Marasteanu, Jaenicke, and Dimitri (2014) argued that many small firms' managements try to keep the quality high and do not sacrifice the quality for price. P1 indicated the need to accept marginal profits to maintain the business sustainability and relationship with customers during the oil price downturns. P1 admitted his company even risked for slightly profit loss in some projects in order to survive its relationship with a particular client.

Altuntaş et al. (2014) argued companies' leaders could get advantages over competitors by either differentiating the products and services or through manipulating the prices. Any endeavor here in between, might result in losing ground to the competition and significantly delay the market share growth (Altuntaş et al., 2014). P1 considered pricing to be one the most important marketing strategies that marketers should deploy at any time. P2 and P3 believed pricing alongside quality, new technology, and uniqueness of products and services is a differentiator factor for customers. Pricing strategies will enhance the profitability of the firms (Xia, Xiao, & Zhang, 2013). P3 emphasized on pricing as a key marketing strategy to increase sales and bring more revenue. P3 reiterated during the market downturn periods, service companies should adjust the prices with market capacity. P3 divided customers into two separate categories including high profile clients and low profile clients. High profile clients are more likely to pay for high price services even during the market depression, though high profile clients may not spend the same way they used to do during normal market conditions. On the other hand, low profile clients would most probably restrict expenditure and shift to service companies with lower price offerings. To account for the most possible targets, service companies should consider innovative ways of pricing the products and services. Hinterhuber and Liozu (2014) argued innovation in pricing is a way of assuring higher revenues and customer satisfaction.

Marketers can use marketing initiatives, including competitive pricing and brand awareness, to enhance the profitability and revenues (Torre et al., 2014). P1 stated right after the initial drop in oil price in summer of 2014, his company's top management requested senior marketing managers to look for alternative marketing strategies and a detailed review of services and products pricings. P1 reiterated changing the prices was not the first action to be taken but was in top priority because everyone believed that customers would soon start cutting costs and reducing budgets. P3 and P4 said reducing prices during the oil downturn periods is inevitable for two main reasons: (a) all clients reduce the budgets and costs, and (b) the service providers should also apply a strict cost control measures. P2 believed dropping the prices would not necessarily mean a drop in revenue. P2 restated although service providers apply more discount on the prices, the service providers employ some severe cost control measures to increase the profitability margin. P5 emphasized the role of top management in balancing the price reduction and profit margin. According to P5, service companies would in turn request their suppliers and other upstream and downstream channels to reduce the prices.

P3 considered lower prices as a negative factor that could affect the efficiency of the workplace because of the inevitable consequences such as employee layoff and workload pressure. Kang, Penn, and Zietz (2015) reviewed data from 1983 to 2010 and found fluctuations in oil price would affect the employment rate as well as overall economy in a negative way. P3 restated the overburden workload, which is a result of the oil price downturn, is a double-edged sword that can either endanger the companies' sustainability or awaken the hidden capabilities of the employees, if can be managed properly. According to P3, surviving the market downturn situations requires taking wise and critical decisions at all level of management to ensure lower prices do not affect the quality of neither workplace nor products and services.

Application to Professional Practice

The outcomes of the study confirm, complement, and add to the extant body of knowledge on marketing strategies that senior marketing managers of the ISCOGI use to enhance performance, revenues, and profits during declining oil price periods. Reviewing the annual reports of the participants' companies confirmed the financial success of the marketing strategies of participants' companies within the Middle East. Therefore, senior marketing managers of the other international oilfield service companies, as well as senior marketing managers of the regional companies who wish for internationalization, can benefit from the study findings. Identifying the customers with similar characteristics and reevaluating the changes in customers' needs due to market dynamics will assist marketing managers in reassessing the market segmentation strategies. Maintaining a reliable and truthful relationship with existing clients and knowing and developing first-hand relationships with new customers is an essential part of the marketing strategies. The dynamics of the market and sensitivity of the customers require a detailed plan to review the existing market segmentations and apply the necessary changes to the existing segments. Marketers should pay extra attention to the new customers that have raised because of the alteration in market requirements. Targeting the right customers will ensure a healthy relationship in short term and long term, and will assist marketing managers to strengthen the rapport with clients.

Senior marketing managers of the ISCOGI and their counterparts in regional corporates should focus on differentiating the products and services to get an edge over competitors. Paying attention to innovations, developing solution-based packages, making partnerships with customers, and becoming an integrated part of the solution in customers' key projects are some of the main strategies that senior marketing managers should follow. According to the participants' narrations, during the oil price downturn, clients wish to have a reliable service company as a partner in solving the problems rather than a mere service provider. Marketing managers should aim to provide a unique and desirable experience for clients to not only satisfy the customers but also exceed their expectations. Trif (2013) identified customer satisfaction as the main force that will lead to brand loyalty and increase long-term profitability.

Because of the low oil price, oil companies try to reduce all direct, indirect, fixed, and operating costs; therefore, service providers should not expect the same prices to shine in upcoming tenders. As a result, senior marketing managers should incorporate the marketing strategies with entire organization's policy to reduce the costs and increase the flexibility of the firm to offer considerable discounts to the customers. One way of assessing competitive ingenuities is to align strategies of brand equity with marketing targets and organizations' profitability objectives (Mohammed, Rashid, & Tahir, 2014). Offering different packages with different prices is one of the best ways to support customers during the oil price downturn. Safari and Thilenius (2013) argued discounted packages based on quantity of sales would encourage consumers to consider more purchases based on their allocated budgets. Lower purchasing power may encourage customers to weigh more on price rather than quality. Therefore, marketing managers should investigate the customers' requirements and send the right message to the research and development departments to come up with the most efficient, high quality, and state-of-the-art products that can serve the clients' purposes. Overall, business leaders can benefit from this research finding through implementation of the marketing strategies recommended by participants.

Implications for Social Change

With the ever-growing market pressure because of the oil price downturn, senior marketing managers are obliged to use strategies that will reduce the costs and increase the profitability. The fluctuations in the oil and gas prices lead to instability in the profitability of the oil and gas companies and pushing companies' top managers to take disciplinary actions to reduce the cost and increase the profitability margins (Shin, Jeong, Lacina, & Her, 2013). Unless marketing manager use strategies to offset market challenges, the top management will keep reducing the number of employees as a direct way of cutting costs. Job insecurities will affect both physical and psychological health of the employees (De Witte, Pienaar, & De Cuyper, 2016; Jiang & Probst, 2016; Schaufeli, 2016) and will result in unethical work behavior (Lawrence & Kacmar, 2017). In such complex and challenging marketplaces, the successful marketing strategies participants in this doctoral study offer could potentially lead to more sustainable and profitable firms in which neither employees nor managers suffer from job insecurities due to market uncertainties. More profitability of the firms could cause less work stress and higher job security. Smit, De Beer, and Pienaar (2016) argued less work stress would lead to greater job satisfaction and healthier behavior by employees. Marketing strategies that can increase revenue and profitability will give top management the chance to be proactive to the market changes rather than taking reactive actions.

Higher sales performance, because of a successful marketing strategy, can result in a better cash flow and may lead to increased operations and activities, which requires hiring more employees and reducing unemployment. Sustainability and profitability of the oilfield service companies mean prosperity for employees and the surrounding families and communities. Moreover, a profitable firm will contribute positively to the local economy development and will increase the chance of having better educational and recreational systems. As a result, the local societies will become healthier and prosperous, and in an ideal case, will leverage the happiness chain to the whole nation. Also, offering state-of-the-art technologies through R&D may protect the world's natural resources for the generations to come and reduce the environmental consequences of nonrenewable energy sources.

Recommendations for Action

Marketing strategies and decisions are among the most critical and important aspects of any company regardless of the size, industry, and nature of the firms. Kumar (2015) acknowledged marketing had become an integral part of the organizations due to engaging the stakeholders in the course of value generation through marketing practices. The role of the senior marketing managers in the oil and gas service companies is similar to their counterparts in other industries, though the nature of the oil and gas industry may imply some differences. However, some senior marketing managers lack strategies to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits. The outcomes of this study proved customers to be the pivotal and key players in the market. Therefore, understanding the changes in customer needs may result in a rearrangement of market segmentations. Marketing managers should know what customers think about certain products and how customers differentiate competitive brands from each other. Based on such information, marketers can customize their brand character to address a particular target market. Understanding the brand’s character will give a competitive advantage to marketers to understand the consumer’s perceptions of a particular product (Su & Tong, 2015).

Building a strong, trustworthy, and manageable relationship with customers is an inevitable part of having a successful business and may lead to attracting more customers. Homburg et al. (2014) found a considerable improvement in business achievements due to a better relationship between organizations and their end users, customers, and other business partners. Considering the challenging environment, marketing managers should develop a strong relationship with all stakeholders to tailor the right products and services based on the customers’ needs and dynamic market requirements. Exploring novel marketing strategies is necessary to stay competitive and profitable (Appiah-Adu & Amoako, 2016). Use of the STP model provides a means for positioning products and services to address different clusters of customers in an efficient manner (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Therefore, marketing managers can focus on the most profitable segments of their business markets and create the maximum benefit from existing and upcoming opportunities. To maintain business sustainability, enhance profitability, and preserve market share, corporate marketing managers must create and conduct strategies to meet and exceed the companies' objectives.

Marketing managers' capabilities can increase the performance of the firms (Ramaseshan et al., 2013) and raise the shareholder's value at the same time (Hansen et al., 2013). All participants in this doctoral study emphasized the importance of having the right person in the senior marketing manager position. Loveland et al. (2015) considered assertiveness, visionary leadership, optimism for career satisfaction, and customers' orientation as some of the competencies that marketing managers should have to take the best marketing strategies. Siahtiri et al. (2014) explored the role of marketing capabilities in delivering critical customer-centric performance, getting new customers, retaining the current clients, and making business partners satisfied. Mahdia and Almsafir (2014) argued organization top managers are the pivotal points of dealing with market challenges and introducing strategies to overcome competition.

I will consider dissemination of the findings of this doctoral study in both academic and practitioner journals, professional seminars, and relevant societies such as Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) as an excellent forum for active professionals and experts in the oil and gas industry. Participating in local forums in the Middle East region and sharing the study findings with marketing managers of service companies seeking for over-the-border activities may shed some light on the way forward to have a better understanding of the challenges ahead and the possible solution for those issues. During the inter-organizational training for marketing and sales people, the results of the study may be useful to raise the awareness, provide recommendations from senior marketing managers, and exchange new ideas.

Recommendations for Further Research

In this doctoral study, I have attempted to explore the strategies marketing managers of international oilfield service companies use to enhance sale performance, revenues, and profits. Similar to other scholar and empirical studies, this research carries some assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The small sample size of five cases might create some difficulties for generalization of the study outcomes. Although larger sample size does not necessarily mean a richer study (Marshall et al., 2013), expanding the sample size may give a chance to have a more precise and truthful illustration of the target population. The methodology of the study was a qualitative case study, which is not an ideal approach to examine the relationship between parameters and variables influencing the strategic marketing decisions. Future researchers may benefit from mixing qualitative studies with quantitative approaches and aim for more comprehensive objectives.

Another limitation of this study was the geographical location, which was limited to the Middle East, though all participants and their corresponding companies had extensive global experiences and subsidiaries all around the world. Future researchers could expand the current study to other geographical locations to understand whether the same themes would emerge or alternative marketing strategies might appear. In addition, researchers may wish to conduct the same study using the same methodology and design over the same population in the future to comprehend how marketing strategies may evolve over time. In this research, I briefly discussed the role of Internet-based technologies in developing marketing strategies in the oil and gas industry. However, all participants argued oil industry is lagging behind in adoption of Internet-based technologies the same way other industries' leaders do. Future studies focusing on the applications of Internet and social media on marketing strategies of the oilfield service companies may open new doors to innovative marketing approaches. Furthermore, researchers may include other industries in future studies using the methodology and design of this study to compare and contrast opportunities and challenges senior marketing managers of other industries face and how deal with such business related problems, particularly during the business downturn periods.

Reflections

The entire doctoral journey was a learning process for me. In times, it was daunting and overwhelming, but my great passion for developing my knowledge, insights, and understanding over the research topic had provided encourage and inspiration to continue building the required blocks. Prior to conducting data collection and analysis, I presumed the process to be easy and straightforward; however, when I started sending interview invitations, conducting the interviews, and transcribing the audio recordings, I understood how tedious and time consuming the steps are. I was amazed by the level of passion and interest that participants showed in providing details of the challenges and endeavors they had faced during the oil price downturn. I managed to reduce my personal bias though reporting participants' insights as they provided, conducting member-checking technique, and using triangulation method. Ponterotto (2014) considered multiple sources of information as an essential part of the data collection phase.

Throughout this research, I recognized similarities and differences among participants' views and approaches to the business problems. The entire doctoral study was revealing, rigorous, and mind opening. Completing this doctoral study, I gained more respect and admiration for senior marketing managers because of the determination, energy, and time they put into promoting strategies that will potentially enhance the profitability of the firms. Interaction with senior marketing managers of the five international oilfield service companies in this doctoral research was an inspiration and honor.

Conclusions

Marketing strategies contribute directly and indirectly to the financial performance of the corporates. Understanding and identifying the right strategies that will potentially lead to higher performance, revenues, and profits is crucial for any business involved in global trades. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to address the overarching research question: What strategies do senior marketing managers of ISCOGI use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during declining oil price periods? Through face-to-face interviews and reviewing the companies' annual reports and website contents, five major themes emerged. The emerging themes not only confirmed the findings of the previous literature and scholar works but also provided supporting documents related to the conceptual framework of the study.

Reviewing the outcomes of this doctoral study, senior marketing managers of the oil and gas industry will find out how the implementation of dynamic market segmentation and attention to the new market players will increase the chance of grasping new opportunities during the oil price downturn. Such strategies require targeting new audiences while maintaining the existing clients by providing customized services and products specifically tailored for addressing customers' needs. In addition, the results of the study showed the importance of maintaining a trustworthy and reliable relationship with existing customers through visible contribution in clients' problem-solving processes. Moreover, differentiating the products and services from competitors will bring significant advantages and give a short-term and long-term edge over the competition. Differentiation will be in terms of innovative tools and services, or in the form of solution packages. Furthermore, the outcomes of the study indicated while pricing is a great differentiator factor in many markets, it can act as a double-edged sword and requires marketers to treat pricing with extra caution. Based on the findings of this study, no one-size-fits-all solution exists to market issues in the oil and gas industry, and each case should be investigated, invested, and interpreted uniquely to extract the most appropriate strategies that suit a specific market.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Participant Unique ID Code:

Part I: Conducting the Interview Process

1. Greet and introduce interviewer and participant.
2. Thank participant for agreeing to partake in the interview process.
3. Provide participate with information such as the purpose of the study and the duration of the interview session (approximately 45 minutes).
4. Review the consent form and verify if the participant still consent to the interview process.
5. Remind participants that interview will be audio recorded only for ensuring the accuracy of the transcription.
6. Retell participants that all information and conversations will be kept strictly confidential.
7. Explain the concept of member checking.
8. Restate that all participants will receive a copy of the final report.
9. Conduct volume check to ensure high quality recording.
10. Record the participants' unique ID code as P1, P2, etc.
11. Ask participant the interview questions.

12. Take notes during the interview process.

13. Sincerely thank participants again for their voluntary contribution.

Part II: Post-Interview - Data Management

1. Transcribe the interview notes and enter them into NVivo software
2. Send a thank you email to all of the interview participants
3. Transcribe the recording
4. Contact participants via email and send the summary of interpretation to participants for member checking
5. After 5 days, send a follow-up email to participants that may not provide feedback on the member checking
6. Thank the participants again for their contributions to the study

Part III: Research Question

What strategies do senior marketing managers of ISCOGI use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during the periods of declining oil prices?

Part IV: Interview Questions

1. What marketing strategies do you use to improve sales performance and increase revenues and profits during the periods of declining oil prices?

2. What strategic marketing decisions do you consider to mitigate the effect of a decline in the oil price on sales performance, revenues, and profits?

3. What strategies do you use to deliver any possible changes in your marketing strategies during the periods of declining oil price to discernible customer groups?

4. What instruments, processes, and procedures do you use to measure the success of your marketing strategies during a decline in oil price?

5. What are the barriers to implementing your marketing strategies for enhancing sales performance, revenues, and profits during the periods of declining oil price?

6. What other additional information would you like to add to strategies you use for enhancing sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices?

Appendix B: National Institute of Health Certificate

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **HESAMEDDIN ZAFARI** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 03/09/2015

Certification Number: 1719790

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in the Study

<Date>

<Address Block>

Dear Sir/Madam,

As part of my doctoral study research at Walden University, I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting to explore strategies senior marketing managers of international service companies in the oil and gas industry use to enhance sales performance, revenues, and profits during periods of declining oil prices. I contacted you to participate because you are a senior marketing manager of an international oil and gas service company located in the Middle East. This invitation is a follow up to your primary consent during our short meeting in the last ADIPEC event. Participation in this doctoral study is voluntary, and all information will be confidential. Please read the enclosed consent form carefully and ask any questions that you may have before acting on the invitation to participate.

If you have agreed to participate in the study, please notify me via the contact information. Upon receiving your confirmation to participation, I will contact you to set a date and time that most suites your schedule. I anticipate that the total time required for each interview will be between 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded and participants will have the opportunity to review an executive-format of my interpretation of their responses for accuracy and correction prior to inclusion in the study.

I sincerely appreciate your valuable time, and thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.